BETTER NOT POUT. BETTER NOT DIE ...

CHRISTMAS CRIME



a Kat Makris
Greek Mafia Novel

ALEX A. KING

Christmas Crime

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This book is for my dog Millie, who always desperately needs to check her pee-mail when I sit down to write.

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Also by Alex A. King

Chapter 1

"NEVER RUN AWAY FROM YOUR PROBLEMS," my father said on a late October evening during my tenth year as we watched one of the neighborhood dogs squat and unfurl a long ribbon of poop on our front lawn. The afternoon before, Mom and I had conquered the last yard work of the year. She mowed, edged, whacked weeds. Leaves were my domain. I was allowed to jump in them after raking them into a pile, as long as I stuffed them into the designated black bags afterwards. Normally yard work was Dad's responsibility but he'd been out on the road driving his truck, and Mom really wanted the yard to stop looking like crap—her word. The dog poop stood out like … like poop on freshly mown grass.

No need for me to ask if dog poop was a problem. Mom's father went to the big asshole-mart in the sky after raging against dog poop on his lawn, so I knew about the health risks of not picking up after pooches.

Out on the freshly mown grass, the dog unloaded at least a week's worth of meals. The owner, Mrs. Young who lived around the corner, continued to stare into space until the fuzzball on the end of the leash trotted back to the sidewalk. Then, without so much as acknowledging the steaming heap's existence, she took off.

"*Re, gamo tin putana,*" Dad muttered, mustering up several of his favorite Greek curse words—words I only ever practiced when I was alone and out of parental earshot. "After all the work your mother did, and now this mongrel comes along and shits all over it."

"Mike, language," Mom said from the kitchen.

"It's not a mongrel," I said, trying to be helpful. "It's a standard poodle."

"I was not talking about the dog," he said darkly. "That old goat thinks she can disrespect this Greek? Ha! My civilization invented her civilization!"

He vanished into the garage. When he reappeared he was dressed from head to toe in black. "I need a plastic bag!"

I followed him to the kitchen, where Mom watched him scour the whole room for a bag. Finally she took pity on him and presented him with a bag from under the sink, where she'd been stashing them for years.

"Going to rob a house?" she asked.

"A mission to right a terrible wrong against all Greeks and

suburban lawns! You shit on my lawn, you shit on Greece."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Dad poked holes in the air with his finger. "Every evening that dog goes shit, shit, shit on the grass. That woman never picks it up. Never! It is time she learned a lesson, and I am the one who will teach it to her. When I am done people will sing songs about me. They will put up a statue in Greece!"

"I can just picture you as a statue," Mom said, "waving a plastic bag. I don't think this is a great idea."

"A great idea? No. It is the best idea because I thought of it. Nobody does revenge like Greeks." Dad winked at me. "We invented that, too."

"Mike …"

Too late.

Mom and I waited by the window while Dad slipped out into the yard and scooped up the poop in his bag.

"This can't be good," she said.

"What do you think he's going to do?"

With the poop-filled bag in hand, Dad skulked down the driveway and vanished down the street.

"The Hand of Poop Justice," Mom said.

"What is that?"

"Your dad's superhero identity."

"Dad is a superhero?"

Arm warm and comforting around my shoulder, she flashed me a conspiratorial smile. "He thinks so."

Cool. My dad was a superhero. Not the superhero we wanted—I liked Captain America—but maybe the one we needed. Lawn poop was gross, especially when it squished on the bottom of my shoe.

There was a yell from down the street. Seconds later, Dad reappeared. He wasn't skulking now—he was running. And he had company. Mrs. Young was chasing him with a broom. She trapped him on the porch, where she pelted him with insults and swatted him with her broom.

"I'll teach you to rub shit all over my car!" she yelled.

"Let me in, eh?" Dad shouted through the window at us.

From the amused curve on her lips I could tell Mom was considering his request. "Should I go out and rescue him?" she asked me.

"He did say I shouldn't run away from my problems," I said, "and if you open the door won't you be helping him run away?"

Like all good advice, I forgot to take it until it was too late.

I know what you did this fall, you stupid pig.

The note's message didn't change no matter how many times I scanned the flimsy sheet of paper some thoughtful person had stuffed under my Jeep's windshield wiper earlier this afternoon, while it was minding its own business in my Portland, Oregon driveway.

My name is Kat Makris. I'm pushing thirty years on this earth. And a month or so ago I killed a Russian man who, unbeknownst to me until almost The End, was family. In my defense, I'd like to say he was begging for it.

Viktor Sokolov, half Russian, half Greek, shot—but didn't quite kill—a government agent, kidnapped us both, hauled us off to Russia in a rusty old cargo ship, and then had the nerve to shoehorn me into a wedding dress. A nice dress, very princess-y, but the intended groom was my cousin. Laws exist against that kind of thing, although in Russia and Greece I suspected incest was a family affair. The wedding didn't happen. Instead, Viktor threw a tantrum because he believed I had the audacity to erase a cassette tape containing codes to the missile silo skulking beneath his family farm. We tussled. The gun between us went off. And I bolted in my bloody dress and snuggled up a brown bear that was more interested in napping than eating my face.

(For all I knew the palm size disc contained the 1980s' greatest hits. Blasting a hole in Viktor had turned me off the idea of hunting down a tape deck so I could listen to the thing.)

Yeah, Viktor Sokolov had it coming. Although I wished what he'd had coming hadn't come from me. Murder, even the self-defense kind, was never on my bucket list, except for when I caught my former fiancé's pie-hole gobbling someone else's hotdog. Even then I'd only wanted to strangle Todd Burns until he was mostly dead.

The cavalry—aka: my family—arrived after the gun went off, and carted me back to Greece, where I spent a day packing up the past few months of my life into bags before asking Grandma to give me a ride home in her private plane.

Now I was hanging out on the roof of my Portland, Oregon home, watching for shady characters. Given that Christmas was a week away and the sky had been spitting rain since late September, it was hard to tell who was shady and who was just wet.

"You planning to stay up there forever?" Reggie Tubbs wanted to know. "I'm pretty sure that's against some law or another."

"You're a retired judge," I told the old man who'd lived next door my whole life. I folded the note and shoved it into my pocket. "Don't you know all the laws?"

"I've forgotten more than I ever knew." He staggered out of the chair and hobbled over to the edge of his front porch. Using one hand

as a shade, he stared up at me. He was in his neighborhood watch outfit: robe and slippers. “How about you come down here and take a look at something for me.”

“Is it your penis?”

He laughed and wagged a finger at me. “You know me too well. What are you doing up there anyway?”

“Looking.”

“For?”

“Trouble.”

“Find any yet?”

“Looking at some right now.”

He cracked up. “There’s no flies on you.”

“Only because it’s December and the flies froze to death back in October.”

“You still planning to be up there come July?”

Good question. I was thinking *no* but open to *yes*. “I’ll have to get back to you.”

“You’ve been up there every afternoon and evening for a month!”

“The house is too crowded. My place is full of animals. It smells like a barn.”

The former judge was judging me. “Why don’t you have pets like a normal person? Adopt yourself a nice cat. Invest in goldfish. How about a dog? A dog will never let you down.”

Dogs were nice. Cats, too. Goldfish died too easily to form lasting attachments but I wouldn’t mind owning my little Nemo for a while. Unfortunately nobody had ever given me a dog, cat, or fish. Instead, I’d been blessed—or not—with a pantheon of unusual beasts, including a Greek car and a rotund and holy cow. Thanks to Grandma’s deep pockets and connections—dubious and non-dubious—I had arrived home with all my pets present and legally accounted for.

“I don’t know, Mr. Tubbs, why don’t you keep your pants on and not flash your wiener at people like a normal person?”

“Touché. That’s French for ‘you got me there.’” Hands on hips, he slow walked to the curb and back. He waved his hand at the lawn—my lawn. “You gonna decorate this year?”

“Maybe.”

“Mike always decorates. I can feel Christmas breathing down my neck. Come to think of it, maybe that’s just gas. I’ve been eating a lot of dried apricots. They use sulfur to preserve those things. You can’t taste the sulfur but it’ll knock you down when it blasts out the other end.”

“Dad’s not here, and I’m not really in the decorating mood.”

“He still in Greece?”

“As far as I know he’s planning to stay. The house is mine now.”

Everywhere except on paper.

"You get yourself a fancy job or something yet?"

Not exactly. Not yet. Procrastination was my new middle name. But the time was coming when I'd have to get a job because I couldn't buy the house with all this no-money.

Whoosh. That was the sound of serious adulting rocketing my way.

The truth was I was way overdue on the job-getting thing and I knew it. Shifting modes was proving to be harder than I had expected. How do you go from cousin-killer and morgue receptionist to nightly couch potato and 9-to-5 employee? Since returning to Portland I had achieved a whole lot of nothing much—not even inner peace. Instead I was paranoid, always watching over my shoulder and consequently tripping over things in my path. Greece and all its foibles particular to my mobster family had made me twitchy.

"I don't suppose you know any place that's hiring?" I asked my neighbor.

He chewed on that a minute while he stared across the street at the newest addition to our neighborhood. The woman who'd moved into the Carmichael house earlier this month was what men of Reggie Tubbs's generation called a dish or a dame. Not Reggie though.

"She's a hot piece of ass," he said as she marched down her driveway in yoga pants and makeup that said she'd do this exercise thing but she wasn't about to ruin her face by sweating, thank you very much. The recent arrival was Baby Boomer age with a body sculpted by jazzercise and kale. We watched her stride down the sidewalk, sawing the air with vicious power arms and skinny thighs.

"There's a Hipster Burger opening up down the street," Reggie Tubbs said at last. "You might fill out an application there, see what shakes out."

Hipster Burger. Even the name sounded ironic. "I suppose I could check them out."

"You do that. Tell them the judge sent you. Ten bucks says you'll get the job. It's not much but it'll get you off that roof."

I blinked. Someone nearby was chopping onions. "Thanks, Mr. Tubbs."

He flipped an "it's no big deal" wave at me and vanished indoors, robe flapping around his bare shins.

LIFE WAS harsh on the roof. Wind whipped over the peaks, probing for weaknesses. Cold, intrusive rain spat in my face. My oversize puffy coat was doing its job, standing between winter and me. Using a gloved hand, I wrestled with my phone to check the time.

I was about to have company.

But first, I needed more coffee. One eye on the woman across the street performing a second lap of the block, I poured coffee—white, sweet—into a cup from my jumbo-sized thermos and took a big slug. Perfect. None of that Greek mud served in demitasse cups. I paired the coffee with an Oreo. It wasn't Grandma's *koulourakia*, but then it also wasn't laced with marijuana or hallucinogens either.

My phone rang. Not it's usual ring. It was the other one, the one that said the person on the other end wanted to see my face. Since coming home I'd been Skyping and Facetiming with half the family.

This afternoon it wasn't family. It never was at this time.

Butterflies breakdanced in my stomach as I tapped the little green dot and Detective Nikos Melas's face filled the screen with its chiseled edges, its fading golden god tan, brandy brown eyes, and dark hair. He was at his desk at the tiny Volos police station near the foot of Mount Pelion, leaning back in his chair, boots on the desk. He was wearing a grin and some clothes but it was hard to focus on the clothes when he smiled at me that way.

Things with Melas are complicated. He's in Greece and I'm not. He's the law and my family is the definition of corruption—at least on the outside. On the inside lurked more complications. On a personal level, I'd kept one of Grandma's secrets. Melas wasn't happy when he discovered Grandma had his workplace bugged. He was less thrilled when he discovered I knew about the hidden camera. He'd wanted me to side with him, but we weren't there yet and might never be. Then there was Xander, another complicated complication of the complicated male kind.

"Are you on the roof?"

"Always," I said. "Are you still at work?"

He angled his phone down so I could get a load of his desk. Always crowded, tonight his desk was overflowing with files. Detective Nikos Melas's branch of the Volos Police Department kicked it old school, because if there's one thing the Greek government doesn't have it's cash—unless you're a corrupt politician, in which case there is always extra dough for an all-expenses-paid vacation and a couple of less-than-difficult women looking for a good time on Greece's euro.

"Wow," I said, ever so eloquently.

"Working overtime," he explained.

"Crime on the rise?"

"Winter is our quietest time. People are too cold to steal anything except firewood and the occasional chicken. This is all paperwork from summer."

"How much did my family generate?"

Dad's side of the family is the most notorious branch of the Greek

mafia. Generating paperwork for the police is what they do for funsies.

Melas patted a tall stack on the verge of collapse. “This is all you. Not your family—you.”

Despite murdering my crazed cousin, crime is so not my thing. I like to think I’m a decent person. I brake for pedestrians and animals. I’ve never had so much as a parking ticket. And my Jeep comes equipped with a blinker I use before turning corners and switching lanes.

Before I could open my mouth to protest, Melas laughed. Warmth spread through me, all the way to my deprived lady garden.

“I am joking,” he said. “But maybe you can help me solve a mystery.”

Gloves muffled the sound of me cracking my knuckles. “I watch all the detective shows, so I know a thing or two about solving mysteries.”

“Okay. Where is your family?”

“Is this one of those trick questions?”

He tilted his chin up then down, indicating a Greek no. “Since you left, I have stopped by the compound almost every day. Kyria Katerina will not speak to me. Nobody will let me in the gate. Only your father will speak to me. We have dinner in Volos every Sunday.”

That used to be our thing, Dad’s and mine. For years after Mom died we bickered over where to eat on Sunday evenings. Dad insisted on variety. Always a different restaurant. Now I knew it was because he didn’t like to establish routine. Routine—out in public anyway—meant vulnerability if his enemies were watching. I knew that now. Back then I figured he was melodramatic and Greek.

“How is he?”

He chuckled. “I think Kyria Dina is keeping him busy.”

“Dina? How? Why?”

Dina is Dad’s ex-girlfriend, the one he never bothered to dump before he fled Greece for the Grandma-free arms of the Americas. In the padded and doily-filled room that is Dina’s brain, she and Dad have been a thing all these years. Mom and me? Figments of our own imaginations. Now that Dad is back in Greece, she had been hunting him … in between shady jobs that may or may not involve selling her cooch and spying for weirdoes like my now-dead cousin Viktor.

“They are not dating, if that is what you are worried about. He spends most of his time trying to hide from her. That man is good at disguises.”

“It runs in the family.”

“I know,” he said wryly. He knew firsthand about my Aunt Rita’s skills. She could trick the eye into believing an elephant was a mouse.

A big mouse, but still a squeaking rodent.

"Is he okay?"

"Your father? He misses you. And he's not the only one." He slammed me with the smoldering Greek god look, all dark eyes and filthy unspoken promises. "Do you think you will ever come back?"

"For a vacation maybe, but not for a while."

"Gus is keeping your job open for now. He is eternally hopeful that you will return."

Gus is—was—my boss at the Volos Hospital's morgue, where I never actually collected a paycheck for yelling at people who arrived with bodies and fled without them. Greece's financial problems have had all kinds of unexpected consequences, including the inability of families to bury their dead or keep them in their graves once their three years of occupation in the dirt are up. Lucky for Gus I was still telecommuting, in a way. When someone needed scolding he called me via Facetime or Skype and let me be the bad guy. For stress relief, it was better than meditation.

"What are you doing?"

Greeks ask what you're doing instead of asking how you're faring because only one of those things is gossip worthy. But Melas wasn't every other Greek—he cared—so I gave him a semi-honest answer.

"Good."

Good is a serviceable word that covers a broad range of territory. *Good* draws people in while keeping them at a distance. In my case, *good* meant I didn't want to mention the first note I'd discovered on my doormat the week after I got home. Well, the doormat was the note. Someone had thoughtfully scrawled NO ONE CAN SAVE YOU, YOU STUPID TWAT across the mat, using something that had originated inside a cat. I'd dragged it out onto the back lawn and hosed it off while my goat tried to nibble the edges. Tossing it out—the mat, not the goat—was out of the question. My mother picked out that mat. Since she was dead and her furnishing-picking days were over, the crap-smeared mat was irreplaceable.

Anyway, the crap note was wrong: someone could save me, and that someone was Grandma. But I couldn't call her for help figuring out who was leaving me all these charming messages, like the one in my pocket and the dozens of others I'd stuffed inside the closet in the spare room. No—wouldn't. I'd flown away from Greece and the perks of being Family for this crime-free life.

In the background Melas's landline rang. He shot me an apologetic glance and answered the call. From the way he was rolling his eyes and biting down on his words I knew his mother was on the other end. Helena Mela (the letter *s* falls off most Greek last names when they switch sexes; not mine—I wasn't letting my *s* go without a fight)

is a small but terrifying creature who used to torture grown men for Grandma before she quit her life of crime and settled down to be a respectable and rabid Chihuahua. Maybe she likes me, maybe she doesn't. It's hard to say with critters.

Melas hung up. "That was Mama."

"In the middle of the night?"

He flashed me a rueful grin. "She only sleeps four hours a night."

No rest for the formerly wicked. "What did she want?"

"She told me to tell say you are beautiful."

"Lies."

"Okay, that was from me. But she did have a message for you. She has been trying to get ahold of Kyria Katerina and getting nothing but deflection, the same as me."

"Grandma lost a couple of family members recently, so she's in mourning and not doing the whole social thing."

"Kyria Katerina is the kind of woman who rolls over speed bumps, whether they are shaped like dead relatives or not. Mama is worried. Every year they burn old shoes together."

"That sounds unhealthy and destructive, but what do I know?"

He tipped back his head and laughed. "It is a Christmas tradition."

"Really? We put up decorations and exchange gifts." Except this year I was failing Christmas. No tree. No decorations. No gifts.

"We do that, too." He grinned. "Burning old shoes keeps the *kallikantzaroi* away—the evil spirits. They bring trouble. They make milk sour, they extinguish fires, and they are hung like whales."

"In that case they're not bringing trouble, they auditioning for porn and maybe bringing pizza."

He laughed again. "I miss you. Do not stay away too long. Until then, if you could let Kyria Katerina know my mother has shoes to burn, that would be good."

We said our goodnights, which left me feeling … things. Nothing an intense Netflix marathon couldn't cure. I climbed down the ladder, stopping to pet my donkey and goat before slipping through the sliding back door. They were both dressed for winter in thick blankets, and when night came they'd be confined to the garage. My cow wandered over to see if I had anything good. All I had were Oreos, and no one gets my Oreos.

I hunkered down on the couch under a heated blanket after double-checking that the doors and windows were locked and the blinds and curtains were secured with no gaps.

Melas's words floated back. He had it wrong. Grandma wasn't missing and neither was anyone else in the family. They talked at me regularly. Sometimes they even let me get a word in. Tomorrow morning I would call to remind Grandma it was shoe-burning time.

Because paranoia isn't paranoia if they're really out to get you, I got up one more time and peeked out of the curtains. Across the street my new neighbor was gearing up for yet another lap. Watching her reminded me that I needed to step away from the window and get a life.

At her driveway, my neighbor stopped. Her head swiveled on its Jane Fonda stalk, slowly, as though an invisible hand was loosening a screw.

She looked right at my curtains, at me.

Yipes.

Chapter 2

GREECE WASN'T PICKING UP. More specifically, Marika, Grandma, and Aunt Rita. My heart seized up. Was everyone okay? Was Melas right: were they missing?

I called Elias, my former bodyguard. Despite Grandma's—and Elias's—protests, I'd left him behind when I fled Greece.

"Boss!" he said. Somehow he squeezed a big smile into that one syllable. I bet he was wicked at packing suitcases. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to get ahold of the family. Why aren't Grandma and the others answering?"

"Is that Katerina?" Grandma said in the background.

Relief washed over me. I'd worked myself into an anxious frenzy for nothing. "Never mind," I said. "Just tell Grandma that she and Kyria Mela are supposed to be burning shoes this week."

He relayed the message. "Anything else?"

"No," I said. "I have to go. Everyone is alive and fine, right?"

"Everyone is in their original packaging."

Good enough.

Hipster Burger was waiting for me. Well, not me specifically. But someone like me: desperate and eager to work for minimum wage. Portland's newest burger joint existed in a new brick building designed to look old. The fixtures were freshly battered metal. The wood counters and tabletops were wood reclaimed from a showroom and priced specially for suckers. No two chairs were the same.

The manager turned out to be a straw with an ironic mustache and a beard that could easily nest several bird families. He was dressed up as the world's frailest lumberjack. He shook my hand like a water pump's handle when I told him Reggie Tubbs sent me, and introduced himself as Wyatt with an h. Whyatt.

"Did you do that, or should I blame your parents?"

He stared at me. "For what?"

"Never mind."

He handed me a clipboard with a twig pen. "I know the judge, so you've already got the job. Just fill out the form." He scanned my license and social security card with a doodad on his phone and handed them back to me. "When can you start? Now? Is now good?"

"I guess I could start now."

"Great." He looked me up and down. "Is that what you're going to

wear?"

Silly me, I'd gone business casual. Black pants. Black button-down shirt. Basically a lot of black, most of it matching. The family was still in mourning for my cousin's murdered wife, so I'd had committed to black along with the rest of them for the next year. Returning to Portland didn't let me off the Greece's long, judgmental hook. "Yes?"

The bird nest on his chin shuddered. "Come on out back. We can do better than that."

His disapproval made me take a closer look at Hipster Burger's other employees, tootling around in their skinny jeans and plaid shirts. The men who didn't have facial hair wore man buns. Apparently the women had a choice of beanies or oversized, and probably fake, glasses.

"We're all out of glasses and beanies," Whyatt said apologetically. "So … mustache or beard? You can choose."

Wow. Lucky me.

"I guess I could do a mustache. I'm half Greek, so with neglect and time probably I could grow one on my own."

"That's the spirit." He led me out back, where plaid shirts hung on pegs. A cardboard box of facial hair sat on the ground. From where I was standing the whole thing looked like a woolly bear caterpillar collection. Whyatt handed me a plaid shirt and nodded toward the box. "I can see you in a Dali or a petite handlebar. When you're done with that, you can unbox the new plates. Up until now we've been using regular, unhip plates."

Humming *Monty Python's* Lumberjack Song, I ditched my winter coat for a plaid shirt and selected a dark brown scrap of fake hair that more or less matched my real hair. It was sticky—eww—and clung to my upper lip without help. Hopefully no one I'd ever met in my life would see me this way. Which, if I were a smart woman, I would realize was a guarantee my entire past was destined to parade through Hipster Burger today.

Whyatt managed to catch me before I got lost. He took me to the storage room, where boxes were stacked six high.

"We haven't done all the unpacking yet. We're in the middle of a soft opening. That's like a practice run so we can get it right before Hipster Burger's grand opening next weekend. Here, you can unpack these." He flipped open a box, revealing a slice of personal computing history.

"These look like old hard drives," I said, probably because they were old hard drives.

"Amazing, right? I got them for a song. Cheaper than regular plates. We use them for serving desserts." He touched a tall stack of newspapers and old magazines. "These are dinner plates."

“Is that hygienic?”

“New Zealand has been selling fish and chips that way for decades. When was the last time you heard of a Kiwi dropping dead from food poisoning?”

That was one of those rhetorical questions, wasn’t it? I really hoped so because I wasn’t sure what a Kiwi was.

He waited.

Oh. Not rhetorical. “Never?”

His hair-enshrouded Bobblehead nodded. “Never. It’s perfectly safe. Well, not perfectly. But we haven’t had any customers get sick yet.”

“How long has this soft opening being softly opening?”

“Moving on,” he said quickly. “Guess what these are.” With a flick he flipped up the flaps of another cardboard box. It was crammed full of old AOL CDs. A whole rainbow of discarded discs.

“A sad remnant of our recent past?”

“Coasters. I got them for a penny plus shipping on eBay.”

“Wow.” That was a whole penny plus shipping more than they were worth. “You’re a real bargain hunter.”

“Thanks,” he said without a shred of sarcasm.

“What about drinks? Do you serve them in shoes?”

He looked at me like I was bananas. “No, we use glasses. Come on, let’s take a look at what goes down in the kitchen.”

In the kitchen, faux hipsters were slinging ingredients onto newspapers: buns; sizzling beef and chicken; lettuce; melted cheese in medicine cups; ditto the sauces. Everything slid onto former headlines, separate and in no way burger-shaped. I hadn’t been in Greece long enough to forget how burgers work.

“I thought Hipster Burger sold burgers.”

“We specialize in deconstructed food.” He indicated a hard drive covered with brown blobs. “Cake, frosting, sauce. All separate. Want a mouthful of frosting without cake? No problem.” He waved his hand at a newspaper holding ingredients. “In the mood for bacon without the cheese? Eat that bacon. Or build your burger without the bits you don’t like.”

“Where are the fries?”

Another worker dropped a whole fried potato onto the newspaper. Not that I wanted to criticize his work, but it looked uncannily turd-like.

“Forget I asked,” I said.

“Were you saying something?” Whyatt said. “Okay, Tabitha here will teach you how to work the cash registers.

Tabitha was a cheerful college-age woman rocking a beanie. She waved at me. I waved back.

“I don’t know why they call it a cash register,” she said. “We don’t take cash. Just cards, Paypal, Apple Pay, all the Pays, and crypto currency.”

“Cash is so retro,” I said.

Tabitha’s forehead crinkled up. “In that case, we should take cash.” She whipped out a notepad, scribbled something down, and then ripped off the paper. The paper went into a wastebasket in the corner of the kitchen. “Suggestion box,” she explained.

This was hell and I was in it. But it was a job, and right now I needed money. While I was slinging ingredients at Hipster Burger by day, I could spend my evenings hunting for something that didn’t involve costumes or whatever trendy grease Whyatt insisted they use to fry their whole potatoes. As far as jobs went this was safe, and I didn’t have to deal with killing or being killed. How bad could it be?

I rolled up my sleeves. “Okay, Tabitha, let’s do this.”

Her face broke out in a smile. “It’s easy. This way.” She took me out front where customers were trickling in.

By noon I had the hang of pressing in dollar amounts, swiping cards, and dealing with virtual cash. Whyatt handed me a newspaper loaded with burger fixings and told me to go take a break.

I carried lunch out front to the designated staff table. As soon as I’d reconstructed my burger and sliced up my fry, my phone rang. Marika’s beaming face filled the screen.

“Look at you,” she said. “I always knew you could grow a mustache. You remind me of my mama.”

“I hope Takis doesn’t get jealous.”

“If he does I will just spit in his *tiganites*. What are you doing?”

Tiganites are fried potatoes—AKA: fries—which I was definitely not eating right now. The lone potato was crispy on the outside but slightly undercooked in the middle. Something told me I’d better prioritize job hunting because Hipster Burger wasn’t going to last long, not unless it stepped up its fry game and maybe started construction on their burgers.

“Working,” I said with all the enthusiasm of a funeral director.

“You found a job! I have never had a job before, except when I was your bodyguard.”

“Hipster Burger is hiring,” I said. “I bet you’d look great in a fake beard.”

“Takis would kill me if I cooked *tiganites* for strangers. Is the food good?”

“It’s food.”

“Now I am hungry. I have to eat or I will vomit.”

Marika is always hungry. Being pregnant doesn’t help. It amps up her appetite from regular pound pup to Labrador. The most dangerous

place on Earth is between Marika's mouth and a bar of chocolate.

"Vomit, vomit, vomit," Takis said in the background. "Why do you have to talk about vomit so much?" Takis is my cousin's cousin's cousin. Which means if we share any blood it's so diluted that my future offspring will have butts instead of the deflated whoopee cushion Takis wears in his pants.

"You make me want to vomit all the time," I told Takis.

"That is because of my personality."

"And your face," I said helpfully. "Hey, don't you have somebody to intimidate or murder?"

"Today is my day off," he said.,

"Henchmen have days off?"

"The union says yes."

"Henchmen have a union?"

Takis made a sound like a cat coughing up a hairball. Someone else might have called it laughter. "Congratulations, you are the world's biggest *vlakas*. Of course we do not have a union."

Marika made a face into the phone. "Ignore him. Tell me everything about your job. Does it pay real money or the promise of money like your job at the morgue?"

"It's a job," I said. "And I'm pretty sure it pays real money. There are laws about that kind of thing here, unless you're an unpaid intern." I thought about it a moment. "Hey, Tabitha, we're not unpaid interns, are we?"

She experienced a deer in the headlights moment. "Let me check. Unpaid interns are trending right now so I wouldn't put it past Whyatt …" Off she scurried to enquire about the status of our paychecks.

"You should come home," Marika said on the screen. "Baboulas will give you any job you want, even the one you had at the morgue. We miss you."

"Not me," Takis piped in. "I am glad you are gone."

We had this conversation every day—sometimes twice. "I miss you too—Marika, not you, Takis—but Greece—"

Hipster Burger's door swung open. A pair over well-dressed men walked in. Businessmen in good suits. Not nearly hipster enough for Hipster Burger. Definitely not the kind of guys who would be okay with eating burger fixings out of newspaper. My gaze swiveled away.

Something in my brain blipped.

My gaze flicked back to the men, gluing itself to the blond one.

Without thinking, my butt began to slide down in the chair, until my mustache was resting on the table.

A million miles away in Greece, Marika asked, "What are you doing?"

"Hiding," I whispered.

“From what?” Her hand clutched the gold cross around her neck. “Is it a criminal? And to think you are all alone there. I knew Baboulas should have sent Elias with you!”

“It’s not a criminal.”

A criminal I could handle. Well, not handle exactly. Let’s go with *tolerated*. This was so much worse. This was the stuff of nightmares.

As though my gaze was tapping on the tasteful pinstripe of his expensive suit, the blond man turned around, until I was staring at Todd Burns, eater of human hotdogs, sampler of sausages, cheating bastard, and my former fiancé.

At first I hadn’t recognized him. Todd shared a lot of traits with mashed potatoes. Both were bland and comforting and white. He was tall but not too tall. Fit but not too buff. Attractive in a way that made people instantly trust him with their money. Todd Burns was cornfields and baseball and July Fourth rolled up in a human skin and lightly toasted in a sun bed.

“Kat?” he said, incredulous.

“Never met her,” I said as I slid further under the table.

“Katerina, what are you doing?” Whyatt called out. “If it’s some kind of mime, I like it. We could incorporate it into the Hipster Burger experience. Mimes are so ironic.”

Ironic wasn’t the word I’d use for mimes but whatever. Right now I was having an existential and personal crisis. For years I’d avoided Todd—Portland was a pretty big place and I didn’t lurk around places where semi-closeted gays with impeccable taste gathered. But now he was here, polluting my ecosystem with his pricey suit and his excellent posture.

“Kat?” Todd said on repeat, damn him.

A pair of shined-to-glass shoes stopped beside the table. I couldn’t help taking a look at myself in their sheen. Wow, this mustache really amped up my resemblance to Dad.

My adrenal gland flipped out. Recently I’d managed to evade a hodgepodge of bad guys, most of whom wanted me dead, so one sleazy ex should be no big deal. Right?

Think, Kat. Crawl to the door and run for your life.

I wasn’t the woman Todd cheated on. Okay, technically I was, but I had evolved. The original Kat Makris came with two accessories: a box of tissues and a bag of chips. Kat 2.0 was somewhat armed and semi-dangerous. In Greece, Grandma had refused to give me a weapon. Instead of a sleek machine that spit bullets—or were they called rounds? I still didn’t know—she gave me Dad’s old slingshot. At the time I was bummed out. Until I realized a person with good aim and a handful of rocks could do some serious damage. Great aim eluded me, but there were rocks everywhere. And when there weren’t,

I had a pouch marbles from Baby Dimitri's shoe and souvenir shop.

My hand moved to my pocket.

Nothing. No slingshot. It was in my handbag, damn it—my bag that was out back with my regular clothes and my regular no-mustache.

Maybe I could flip the table and run. Escape was still possible.

Too late. Todd crouched and peered under the table. "Hey, Kat. What are you doing under the table?"

"Cleaning." The table and mustache muffled my voice.

"Cleaning?"

"It's filthy under here. Probably a health hazard. You should leave before you catch salmonella or scabies."

He winced. "Didn't this place just open?"

"Yes, but it was more of a soft opening with germs. They're saving the real hygiene for the grand opening."

Todd didn't look worried. He did look amused. What was so funny, and why wasn't he leaving? This wasn't his domain, it was mine, damn him to Hades.

He offered his hand. I slapped it away because there was more dignity in crawling out and bashing my head on the underside of the table as I unfolded my body.

"What do you want, Todd?"

He glanced up at the menu board, which was basically a giant metal sheet covered in a preschooler's magnetic letters and numbers. "I'm thinking a burger, maybe some fries. Do you have onion rings?"

Boy did I have news for him, and all of it bad. My ex fiancé was a neat freak. Ten out of ten, he'd flip when he realized he would have to construct his own meal of messy burger fixings on a slab of newspaper that other hands had handled.

"That's not what she meant."

Someone had tossed me a lifesaver—the boat kind, not the candy kind, which was lucky because I'm not a fan of hard candy—and that someone was the shady yet unconventionally handsome character standing next to Todd. Another suit. Short. Dark. Compact and stocky. A nose so metaphorically crooked that I was shocked that he wasn't wrapped in a suit with serious sheen and a bulge that said he was concealing a shoulder holster.

Greece had made me paranoid. Probably he was a decent guy with a career in a respectable business that didn't involve racketeering, money laundering, or assassinating competitors.

Todd's new man toy, or a fellow accountant? Either way, I was grateful for the intervention. I just didn't show it because my old grudges were mine, damn it, and I wasn't about to let them go without a fight. If Todd's pal seemed miffed at my snub it didn't show. He

plastered on a big smile—possibly a real one—and offered his hand.

"Kat, good to meet you. I'm Francis."

I eyed him suspiciously. "Is Francis your first name or last?"

"Yes."

A smart ass, eh? Normally I appreciated a good smart ass. Today wasn't a normal day, thanks to the Todd invasion. "Would you look at the time? My break is over."

Todd's eyebrows tried taking a hike, they really did. Unfortunately they'd had a recent run-in with what I suspected was Botox. Aunt Rita loved her Botox, but on her it worked. Todd looked more like he walked through life with a constant wedgie. "You work here?"

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that if I do I might suddenly realize this is real and not a bad dream."

Francis cracked up. What was he laughing at anyway? I was serious.

Todd had questions about my employment situation. "What happened to bill collecting?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Let's just leave it at that." I made little sweeping gestures at the door. "Shoo. Scram. Skedaddle."

"But I want a burger," Todd said.

Whyatt appeared beside me, a gaunt apparition in flannel and facial hair. "Are you trying to get rid of customers? Because that's not cool."

"No, but is it ironic?" I asked him. "Imagine if Hipster Burger shunned paying customers. People might throw money at you to get rejected."

"I need to think about that," my new boss said. He wandered off again.

"Let's go." Francis jabbed Todd with his elbow. "We're making Kat uncomfortable." He turned to me. "Or do you prefer Katerina?"

"Katerina Makris, with an s."

"Where does the s go?"

"On the end."

"So that's a silent s then?"

I golf-clapped. "Give the man a Snoopy." My attention cut back to Todd. "Even your Narnia-loving dude-bro here recognizes a good idea when he hears one. Go away. Far, far away. Then drive at least a hundred more miles."

Todd looked as confused as a Botoxed man could. "Narnia?"

"She thinks I'm in the closet," Francis explained. "So far in the closet I'm in Narnia." He looked to me for confirmation. "Isn't that right?"

"Partying with Mr. Tumnus but not the beavers," I confirmed.

Francis winked at me. What was that all about? Weirdo.

Before Todd could do any more damage to my psyche, I conjured up some middle grade excuse about needing to wash my hair—and condition it, too—and bolted out back.

Tabitha looked up from a block of Velveeta she was melting with an ionic hair dryer. “Who’s the cute guy?”

“My ex.”

She made a face. “Awkward.”

“I was hoping he wouldn’t recognize me with a mustache. Although now that I’m thinking about it a mustache would make me more his type.”

“Sounds like my ex,” she said. “Except he left me for a girl with a forest of nipple hair.”

A horse-faced girl with a sheet of beige hair dangling dangerously close to the grill scowled at her. “I’m not a girl, I’m a natural woman.”

Tabitha pointed the hairdryer at her. “That’s Sandy.”

“Forest Nipples?” I asked.

“She’s the one.”

Wow. And I thought my situation was uncomfortable. At least I didn’t have to punch a time card with Todd.

Sandy waved. Her hair touched the grill. The stink of sizzling keratin filled the kitchen.

“Not again, Sandy,” Whyatt called out. “You have to tie your hair back, it’s the law.”

“It’s discrimination and sexism,” Sandy hollered back at him.

That shut him up. He skulked back to the front of the restaurant and returned a moment later. “Your friends ordered two Hipster Burgers with double guacamole and manchego cheese. They ordered to-go.”

“Can I spit on their food?” I asked.

“That’s not hygienic.”

“You let Sandy wear her hair down.”

“Fine, but only in the cheese. Tabitha gets it hot enough to kill anything too virulent.”

“Look on the bright side,” Tabitha said. “It’ll burn his lips off if he eats it too soon.”

I COULDN’T HELP SNEAKING a peek at Todd and his buddy as they grabbed their to-go bags and meandered out like they had all the time in the world. Must be nice to take long lunches. Actually, it was nice. A few weeks ago I was taking those long lunches. Greek custom suggests—nay, demands—everyone eat a huge meal and spend all afternoon napping.

Now I was stuck working ten until—

"When is quitting time?" I asked Whyatt.

"Six o'clock."

Now I was stuck working ten 'til six, with only a few minutes to build a burger and knock it back while I video chatted with Marika. But now it was my life, my choice. All my decisions were mine, even if I wound up living under a bridge next to the dodgy guy who sells guns out of his trunk. No puppet master—Grandma—yanking my strings. Nobody to cover the property tax bill, except me and my paycheck from Hipster Burger.

Whyatt sidled up to me. "Now that your drama has left the building, you can go take some orders."

I moseyed on over to the cash register, where a teenage kid was perusing the menu on the wall above my head. While he did that, I watched Todd and Francis exchange words. Todd eased into the driver's seat of a late model Audi. The men didn't kiss, didn't hug, didn't so much as shake hands.

"Is that your real mustache?" the kid asked me.

"Is that your real nose?"

His eyelashes fluttered. "What?"

Todd backed out. With a wave, he left Francis standing on the sidewalk, holding a bag of newspaper wrapped burgers. Strange guy. Definitely shady looking. Probably had a Sicilian last name and a grandmother with a hunchback and potty mouth.

As though he were reading my mind, Francis turned around. Through the tinted glass, somehow, he made eye contact. His free hand rose. He pointed a finger gun at me, but instead of shooting he raised it in a salute at the last second.

Despite the heat rising from the grill at my back, I shivered.

Chapter 3

THROUGHOUT GREECE, Grandma's nickname was Baboulas. Translation: the Boogeyman. But although I knew my grandmother was the Greek boogeyman, whose coping mechanism involved baking up a storm and marathon gardening sessions, in my twenty-eight-year-old heart I believed a different boogeyman was still out there, and it wasn't anyone's baklava-baking grandma.

While I've personally never met anyone who lost a child to the boogeyman of the English-speaking world, I suspected he, she, or it was hiding in my bedroom's walk-in closet right now, waiting for me to peek out from under my covers. That boogeyman, or boogeywoman, was making noises, barely perceptible yet there.

Ha. Fat chance that would happen. I'd been sleeping this way—hidden under the covers, without so much as a toe jutting out—for close to three decades. No way would I mess up and shatter the habit of a lifetime.

I heard the noise again. A light scuffle. Air shifting. I wasn't alone.

"Stay in your lane, Boogeyperson," I said with more conviction than I felt.

My fingers darted out to the bedside table, snatched up my phone, hauled it back under the sheet, comforter, and blanket. With all this bedding, I definitely meant business. I did what any sane person did when they suspected someone—or something—was in their closet: I called the cops. Well, Melas. I called Melas.

He answered immediately. A slow, sexy smile sprawled across his face, hungry for something that wasn't the souvlaki in his hand. "What are you doing?"

"I'm in bed," I said. "Before you speak, I want to know where you got souvlaki at nine in the morning."

"I am the law," he said.

"Was that ironic? I'm working at a place called Hipster Burger and it broke my irony meter."

He gave me a seductive look and waved the souvlaki in front of the camera. "Do you want my souvlaki?"

I did. I really did. Burgers are delicious but they'll never be souvlaki.

"Where did you get it?" My voice was almost a whimper. Good souvlaki had that effect on me.

His attention slid away. "Mama."

My saliva dried up. My everything dried up. “She made it?”

“No—”

The cop car’s door opened and the view shifted to a compact woman with helmet hair and a birdlike beak. She looked at me the way cats look at bird feeders and fish tanks. “Katerina, is that you?” Kyria Mela demanded. “Where is your grandmother?”

“At home?”

Boy, I hoped that was the correct answer. Kyria Mela gave me the willies.

Rummaging happened. She seized her son’s phone and swiveled it until I was staring at a large nylon mesh bag bulging with what looked like discarded human skin. “What am I supposed to do with these, eh? Tell me, what?”

Yikes! “What *is* that?”

“Shoes! Old shoes! How else am I supposed to banish the *kallikantzaroi*?”

Greeks and their superstitions. On the outside their crusts were Christian, but on the inside they oozed with ancient beliefs that periodically required the sacrifice of old shoes.

“Donate them to people who need shoes?”

From across the ocean, and through a complicated net of various satellites, her glare bored into my face, probably burning out trillion-dollar equipment on the way through. Even now, governments were scurrying around, trying to figure out which enemy had ruined their pricey technological marvels.

“My milk went sour this morning. These shoes have to be burned before more disasters befall my family. Do you want to be responsible for the *kallikantzaroi* destroying my life and everyone I love?”

Was her milk really sour? It was hard to tell with Greek milk. They didn’t really do dairy farming the way English-speaking countries did. Even in its freshly squeezed state, Greek milk was suspect.

“I told her it was shoe-burning time,” I said, wondering if I could fake a dropped connection.

She turned her hawkish gaze on my surroundings. “Where are you, and what is wrong with your face?” She pointed to her lip.

The mustache and its dastardly adhesive had left me with a rash. “Allergies, I said. “And I’m in bed.”

“With the blankets over your head because you think the *baboulas* will snatch you?”

“How did you know?”

She snuffled. “You are too old. The *baboulas* only takes children. It grabbed my Nikos once when he kept sticking his feet out of the bed. I told him, but did he listen?”

“They were too hot,” he said. “And it did not grab me, it tickled

my foot."

There was sound from the closet again. Creepy. Crinkling. Otherworldly.

"*Meep*," I said.

Kyria Mela's eyes narrowed. "Did you go *meep*?"

"There's something in my closet. If it's not the *baboulas* then it's probably just a serial killer."

"Probably," she said.

"You're not supposed to agree with me!"

"Mama," Melas said. He turned the phone so I could see him. "Call the police—your police—if you are worried."

"Mama what?" Kyria Mela said. "That is the life she lives now as Katerina's granddaughter. Serial killers will always be hiding in her closets and under her bed. I would not be surprised if her walls are filled with men holding weapons, waiting for a good time to sneak out and attack. Most likely while she is sleeping."

My adrenal gland kicked out a fresh batch of flight-or-fight juice. "Are you talking about serial killers or cockroaches?"

"If I were you, I would get up and look," she said. "The serial killer will get you anyway. This way will be faster."

Melas swiped at his phone. His mother was too quick for him and swept it out of his reach. "Mama!"

"What? I am a practical woman, Nikos. I cannot believe Katerina sent her granddaughter back to Greece without a bodyguard. She must not care about the girl as much as she led us to believe."

I raised my hand as much as I could without disturbing the covers. "Right here. I can hear everything you say."

Kyria Mela snorted with disgust. "You are still hiding like a little child? Get up like a woman and look in the closet. Maybe take something heavy with you to use as a weapon if you need it."

I considered my options. Mostly what I had was furniture, pillows, and a Disney princess musical jewelry box. What else? "I have a lamp."

"A lamp is good," she said. "You can destroy a man's skull with a decent lamp."

"This one came from Walmart. I'm not sure it qualifies as decent."

"What is the Walmart? I do not know this Walmart, but I know lamps. Take it and go."

(Greece doesn't have Walmart or any equivalent. But they do have Roma hawking chairs and melons from the back of rusted pickup trucks … so that's not even remotely the same thing.) Kyria Mela was some kind of sorceress. My brain didn't want me to slide out of bed and seize the rickety lamp I'd bought to replace the sturdier Disney lamps that had preceded them—those were currently stowed in the

crawlspace above me, with other remnants of my childhood—but my body decided to follow her orders. No wonder she'd rocked the hell out of being Grandma's torturer. Grown men probably made up stuff just to keep her happy after they were done spitting out their teeth.

Lamp in one hand, phone in the other, I crept towards the closet.

Scuffle.

I froze.

"This reminds me of that witch movie, the one where the people are in the woods with their video camera," Kyria Mela said.

"Mama!" Melas said.

"You keep saying that, but are you helping? No. You are the policeman and yet I am the one helping Katerina and giving her good advice."

I wouldn't call it good advice—chances were excellent I was marching to my doom at the hands of a machete-toting freak in a mask—but no way would I say that to her face, not even from thousands of miles away. The woman had powers. Probably she could shrivel me like a salted snail with one particularly venomous stink-eye.

"You do not have to do this, Katerina," Melas said.

"But she told me to," I said helplessly.

I reached the door. I lowered the lamp, then I raised it back up and lowered the phone. Then that came back up, too. I had one too few hands and no genetic mutation that would cause spontaneous extra hand growth. No bra to stuff the phone into. No pockets. Nowhere for the phone to go except between my teeth. Setting down the lamp was out of the question. The Walmart lamp might be all that stood between me and certain death.

"You have a donkey in the forest," Kyria Mela said.

Christ in a cage, this woman. How Melas had grown into a normal human being was beyond me. Of course, like many Greek mothers she'd raised him to believe he was the second coming of any number of gods, mostly the important ones. Any boogers would have to wait. Odds were high they'd be a coroner's problem soon. Maybe Gus's—if Grandma and the whole gang showed up to transport my remains back to Greece.

"I'm going in," I said through my teeth, distinctly not going in.

"What are you waiting for?" Kyria Mela said.

"Mama, leave her alone," Melas said.

"What if she ends up being the mother of my grandchildren? They will need a strong mother, not a woman who was afraid of a wardrobe."

My jaw fell open. My phone hit the floor. Whoever was in the closet, they quit moving. Lamp in hand, I stooped to pick up the

phone. No damage. Thank goodness. Now that I'd put a crimp in the family umbilical cord I wasn't sure when I'd be able to afford a replacement. Probably I wouldn't need one living under that bridge anyway.

Melas stepped in to save the day. "I remember you being afraid of a spider. You called me to come over and shoot it."

"Spiders are the devil. What else did you expect me to do?" his mother said. "Open the door, *re*."

Fine. The door wasn't going to open itself. At least I hoped not.

I reached out and touched the handle. "If you're an axe murderer, I hope that thing isn't sharp enough to take out a lamp." The words came out mangled on account of my teeth and the phone stuck between them.

On that optimistic note I yanked the door open.

And stared.

Then I closed the door again and went back to bed, returning the lamp to its original position on the way. I pulled the covers over my head. I sighed.

"What was it?" Melas wanted to know.

"Nothing," I said.

"Was it a serial killer?"

"All signs point to *no*."

From half a world away, Melas and his mother stared at me.

"You cannot do this to us," Kyria Mela said. She threw in a finger wag for good measure to let me know I was really in hot doo-doo now. "I do not like cliffhangers."

"I have to go," I said. "Work tomorrow."

Grandma's former nail-puller had a face like granite. That granite was now hardening in to lonsdaleite. Science says the world's hardest material forms when a meteor containing graphite whacks Earth. Science didn't know about Kyria Mela's face. "If you do not tell me what was in that closet I will fly over there and make you eat wood myself."

Eating wood sounds sexy but it's the last thing you want when it's coming out of an older Greek woman's mouth. That pair of words means you're about to get an ass whooping—and not in a good way.

Melas suppressed a grin.

"Goat," I said

Kyria Mela blinked. "Goat?"

"*Maa … maa*! Goat."

She stared at me so hard and long I thought the screen had frozen. Just as I was about to kill the app and start over she said, "I will see you later, Nikos." The car door opened. She got out, taking her box of old shoes with her.

“What did I say? Was it the sound effects?” I asked him.

“Do you really have goats in your closet?”

“No …”

He relaxed.

“… Just the one.”

Laughing, he shook his head and tapped on the phone. I watched his gaze scroll across the screen. “Get some sleep, Katerina. I have to go fight crime.”

“What crime?”

“Hostage situation. A flock of geese won’t let a woman out of a tree unless their demands are met. I have to stop for a loaf of bread on the way.”

“Never negotiate with terrorists.”

“Whoever said that never met geese.”

WHEN I WAS DONE TALKING to Melas I grabbed my goat and steered it down the stairs, to the garage, where it trotted over to the donkey for company. Poor animal. It was used to hanging out with the compound’s dogs and the donkey was a temperamental substitute. But it was the only way to keep my goat from gnawing on what was left of my shoe collection.

On the way back to my bedroom, I peeked into the spare room, where my bear was curled up in a corner on a pile of quilts. Her ears twitched. Her head unfolded itself from her body and her big eyes blinked. No big surprise bears were related to dogs. There was something still canine about them. Not the people-eating bit, but definitely their faces. Bear heaved herself off the ground, staggered over with a look in her eye that said she didn’t fancy spending the night alone.

“Me either,” I said. “Come on. But don’t hog the bed.”

NO TEETHMARKS. All limbs accounted for. Sleeping next to this particular bear turned out to be more successful than the news led me to believe.

I rolled over, away from the bear breath, to check my phone.

Text messages from Melas. Photos. A vicious crime scene. Dozens of geese clustered around a tree, murder on their homicidal minds. Above their heads: dangling legs, stockings rolled up to fleshy knees, black slip-ons.

I fired off a text message.

Did you arrest the geese?
Pappas left them in his car.
Left them, or too scared to let them loose?
Yes.

Thinking about the barrel-shaped sergeant with a carful of feathered passengers he couldn't offload made me grin. I like Pappas—and his adorable, cherubic wife Irini—but c'mon … *geese*. Who wouldn't find that hilarious? Besides Pappas, I meant.

Why Grandma didn't invest in geese was beyond me. Nobody did security like a flock of the white birds. Maybe I should acquire a couple myself. Not that it was necessary now with all the no-crime in my life.

With a strange feeling in my chest that I couldn't adequately describe, but that definitely wasn't an imminent heart attack, I slid out of bed and into a hot shower that made me suspect I could tackle the day. Provided I didn't have to wear a stick-on mustache and sell poison-free food to salami-scarfing exes.

"You have to wear the mustache," Whyatt said when I dropped the sticky strip of shame into his hand.

"No way, Jose." I reached into my bag and pulled out a beanie. Everyone in Oregon owns a beanie. It's what we use instead of umbrellas. "Ta-da!"

My new boss relaxed. "Acceptable. Head to the storage room and unfold the new shipment of newspapers. Break down the boxes and take them to the recycling dumpster out back when you're done. Gonna be a busy day today."

"Aye-aye, captain." I got to work unpacking and smoothing out newspapers so that customers could read the funny pages after they'd wasted time constructing their own burgers. Then I broke down the boxes and hauled them out back to the recycling. From here, I had a view of nothing much except the backs of the other businesses in this shopping center and the waist-high cinderblock wall that formed a C around the dumpsters.

Whyatt stuck his head out the door and whistled. "There's a package here for you."

"A package? You mean … a box?"

"Better than those plastic bags. Do you know how long it takes those to break down in a landfill?"

I ignored the science lesson. A package? That couldn't be right. Nobody knew I worked here except Marika.

Wrong-o. If Marika knew, the whole family knew—and probably half of Greece by now. Baboulas's one and only granddaughter slinging burgers for cash was worthy of least a headline or two. But why would anyone send a package here instead of home? The math

didn't work, unless someone in the family was a Time Lord. Not as crazy as it sounded. Grandma had her fingers in all the pies. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them was time travel.

Logic stepped in to casually mention that time travel wasn't a thing yet—at least as far as I knew, so odds were good the package wasn't from Grandma or anyone else in the family.

Maybe Whyatt had reading issues. The poor guy couldn't spell his own name.

"For me?"

He nodded once. "Got your name on it and everything. Want me to open it for you?"

"Pretty sure that's a federal offense here, Whyatt."

"Not if USPS didn't deliver. Some random guy dropped this one off."

"What guy? What did he look like?"

Shrug. "I don't know. But next time get your shame packages delivered to your home, okay? I got all excited because I thought it was our new menus. The old ones had a typo."

"Shame package? What's a shame package?"

The door widened. Whyatt vanished and Tabitha took his place. She was hauling more boxes. I held the door for her.

"Shame packages are packages you don't want your partner to know about, so you get them delivered to work or a pick-up locker. That way you can hide them, or make them blend in with the rest of your surroundings before your partner gets home and discovers you've been shopping again."

"I don't have one of those partner things." What I did have were complicated contenders. Had. Past tense. Sure, Melas and I talked every day, but where was Xander? We hadn't spoken once since I flitted back home. If I was honest with myself—and I try to be unless it's something like telling myself I'll only eat one chunk of baklava—I was miffed that he hadn't so much as sent me a text message featuring his slow-rotating, tanned, and muscular finger. "Or any money to do any shame shopping."

"Then maybe someone sent you a present. It *is* almost Christmas." Tabitha flashed a big grin before vanishing inside again.

A mystery gift. Great. Maybe it was from Dad. No one else gave me Christmas gifts. But why send it here?

I called him.

"Did you send me a package?"

"What is this? No 'Hello, Dad, how are you? I made a big mistake coming back to Portland with its rain, rain, rain.' I am good, but Dina will not leave me alone. I am thinking about faking my own death to get away from her. Wait—what package?"

“The one that just arrived for me at work.”

“You found a job? That is great news! Your mother would be proud if she was not busy being dead.”

The little voice in my head said he’d be less impressed if he knew about Hipster Burger. Dad had feelings and opinions about hipsters and burgers, and combing the two might make his head explode.

“Weird,” I said.

“Someone sent you a package at your new job?” Dad said.

Tabitha reemerged—without garbage this time. “You better get in here. Whyatt is this close to opening your mail. The curiosity is gonna kill him.”

“I have to go, Dad.”

“Katerina,” Dad said. “Wait, don’t—”

My finger pressed the End Call dot.

“Uh oh,” Tabitha said. “Whyatt is approaching your box with a huge-ass knife. He’s gonna cut it. Is it just me or does this guy have issues—”

I opened my mouth to protest, and then the planet exploded—or maybe just Hipster Burger.

Chapter 4

WINDOWS BLEW out of their frames, spraying epic mouthfuls of glass into the air. The metal door flew off and sailed over our heads, where its life ended mashed against the low cinderblock wall. I threw Tabitha to the ground. This wasn't my first ride on the bomb pony.

"Ohmygod!" she screeched. "Ohmygodohmygodohmygod! I told Sandy not to smoke near the gas grills!"

My nervous system told me to run away—fast. My brain and my sense of human decency said I should go in and save anyone who could be saved. They wrestled for control of my body for a moment while I peeled Tabitha off the ground and told her to call the fire department.

Her eyes were wild. "I don't know what to say!"

"Tell them the truth: Hipster Burger blew up."

She fumbled with her phone. "Okay. Okay. I can do this. Shit—I just called my mom. I'm fine, Mom. Work blew up, that's all. Hang on."

My brain won the battle. Skin freezing cold despite the heat radiating in waves from the brick building, I tiptoed across the ocean of jagged glass to the back door. Smoke poured out, thick and reeking of a toxic chemical spill. Tears ran to my eyes' defense. Today was one of Portland's few dry winter days, just my luck. I felt around for my sunglasses but they were inside, along with the rest of my things. I had to go in. There were people in there. Well, probably pieces of people. But some of them might be whole and alive, and I was determined to save their skins.

Going in the back door was impossible.

Weird for a Greek, considering they'd invented entering back doors.

I stifled a giggle.

What was wrong with me? Now was not the time for butt sex jokes. Stress and fear did crazy things to my mind.

"Where are you going?" Tabitha called out.

"Around the front. Can't go in the back."

"Wait for me."

I heard the telltale crunch of Tabitha creeping over and between glass shards formerly known as windows, until she was right behind me.

Hipster Burger's road-facing windows were still intact. We hadn't

opened for the day yet so there were no screaming, crying customers pouring out, thank goodness. Sandy and some of the others—I didn't know their names yet—were outside, staring at the burning building, dazed. I left Tabitha with them and the others who were racing out of their stores to check out the potentially viral disaster.

"You can't go in," someone said. Maybe it was me. I didn't listen—not even to myself.

Hipster Burger was dark and dense with smoke. No electricity.

"Whyatt?"

I used the plaid shirt I'd borrowed from my probably dead boss as a filter for my face. My phone's flashlight cut back and forth across the smoky gloom, hunting for survivors.

My phone rang.

Marika.

I put her on speakerphone.

"What are you doing?" she asked me.

"Oh, you know. Searching for survivors in post-explosion debris."

There was a pause. Then: "I cannot believe you are having adventures without me. How is work?"

"Safe to say I don't think I'll be working tomorrow."

I stepped around the counter, into the kitchen area. My foot touched something. A pair of overly surprised eyes looked up at me. Below them sat a familiar mustache and beard.

"Whyatt?" I nudged him with my boot. "Whyatt?"

Something in the kitchen fell with a metallic clank. Whyatt's head rolled toward me without bringing the rest of his body for backup. Bile lurched up my throat. I leaped back, but the head was on a collision course with my foot.

"Ohmygod! It's coming right for me!" I said. I leaped backwards and up onto a table. Whyatt's head kept on going until it struck the wall with a dull thud.

Marika's shrieks filled the burning husk of the Hipster Burger. Then she stopped. "Wait—what is coming right for you?"

"My boss's head."

"And his body?"

"I don't know! The head just touched my foot."

"I guess you will not be getting a paycheck then. That is too bad. Now you will have to find another job."

Finding a new job was maybe fifth on the list of my current worries. First, I had to comb Hipster Burger for survivors.

"Marika, can you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Don't tell anyone in the family that my workplace blew up."

"I will do my best," she said.

Marika's promise didn't reassure me. I'd seen her best. Its resemblance to her worst was uncanny.

I ended the call and managed a circuit of the restaurant before emerging empty handed. Although I managed to save my cross-body bag before it went up in flames.

I burst outside into the thin winter light. Fresh air triggered a coughing fit.

"Is everyone here?" I croaked.

"We don't know," Sandy said. "We all just started. Whyatt's not here, I know that much."

"And Sandy didn't die in a fire, which totally sucks," Tabitha said.

"Whyatt …" I struggled to think of a nice way to tell them Whyatt's body and head had parted ways. "Whyatt is no longer with us. Or with himself, in a manner of speaking. Unless we have a necromancer in the house, Whyatt is gone for good."

One of the other Hipster Burger employees, a noodle in a plaid shirt and skinny jeans raised his hand. "I'm a Paragon level 1000 necromancer in *Diablo III*."

"Can you put his head back on?"

Tabitha leaned over and painted Sandy's shoes a burger-colored shade of vomit. "I always wanted to do that," she said as Sandy squealed and tried to shake the puke away.

"I don't think so," the wannabe necromancer said. "Necromancers only raise whole bodies."

Within five minutes the Portland Fire & Rescue Bureau rolled up, along with the local cops. Before long the fire was out and Hipster Burger was another failed eatery. With its newspaper plates and its AOL CD coasters, the restaurant's demise was inevitable from the get-go. All the explosion did was expedite its death.

The police had questions about things like arson and grudges and Occupational Safety and Health. They gave Sandy's unrestrained hair the side eye. One of the boys in blue kept glancing at me. A redhead. Glowing white skin between freckles. A mustache the color of marmalade. His nametag read MOSS.

"I know you," he said when it was my turn under the microscope.

Despite the fact that I'd never committed anything even like a crime—at least not on American soil—guilt washed over me. "I didn't do it!" I blurted.

His pointer finger got all up in my face. Close enough to bite. "I know I know you."

That got everyone's attention. "I was outside recycling when Hipster Burger exploded. Ask Tabitha."

Tabitha raised her hand. "True story."

He ignored her. "Name?"

“Katerina Makris. That’s with a silent S on the end.”

Officer Moss clicked his fingers. “I knew I knew you. You’re Baboulas’s heir.”

“I prefer granddaughter.” His words sank in. My mouth hung open before snapping shut so hard I almost severed my tongue. “Wait—you know my grandmother?”

“My family is Greek.” He performed a little head lean at his partner. “Used to be Moussouliotis until my grandfather changed it to fit in better. We always have Greek newspapers around. Seen you on the front page a couple of times recently.”

As Scooby Doo would say: *ruh-roh*.

His partner cleared his throat. “Moss wants you to come in for further questioning.”

“Further questioning?” Were they high? “You haven’t even asked me one question related to the explosion.”

The policemen exchanged glances. “Was it an explosion? How do you know?”

“Because something went BOOM and then the door flew off the building! What’s that if it’s not an explosion? A really loud fart? Unless I’m being charged with something, ask your questions here.”

One of my fellow Hipster Burger coworkers fist-pumped. “They really hate it when regular people know their rights.”

Officer Moss forked his fingers and touched his eyes, then pointed two fingers back at me. Who did he think he was, Robert DeNiro? “I’m watching you. I know who your family is, even if you say you didn’t know they existed until a few months ago.”

“Wait a minute, how did you know that?”

“It was in the paper. I also know where you went to school, how much you weigh, and your favorite color.”

“The newspaper doesn’t know how much I weigh!”

“One-twenty-five.”

“That wasn’t in the paper!”

“I got it from a website, so what?”

“What website?”

“The Crooked Noses. It’s all about people like you.”

“People like me? I’m not a criminal! If there are gossip and paparazzi shots of me on that stupid board then it’s only because some people are obsessed and need to get a life! And it’s wrong about my weight—it’s more like one-thirty. And I owe it all to my rabid consumption of Greek sweets. What is my favorite color?”

“Black,” he said.

“Ha! Wrong. Black isn’t technically a color.”

He did the eye thing again. “We’ll be in touch.”

THE fiRE DEPARTMENT couldn't do anything for poor Whyatt. They reassembled him in a bag like the world's least complicated jigsaw puzzle and the coroner hauled him away.

I fumbled with my car keys. My knees shook all the way home as I stewed. The big bada boom rattled Tabitha's memories so she had forgotten that Whyatt was itching to help himself to my package moments before the explosion. Not me. I remembered. A package addressed to me. Delivered to my new job. Where few to zero people knew I worked. Where nobody legitimate would send me a package.

Probably it was my Makris blood that had kept my mouth shut in front of the police. We were designed to evade the law—although Grandma and Dad were the law. It was more than my DNA that had zipped my lips though. My desire to be a regular human overrode my desire to be a helpful citizen. I'd run home to Portland to get away from things like this. I didn't want to believe someone sent me an exploding package because that would mean my casual stomp out of the family sandpit was all for nothing.

Body quaking, I parked in the driveway and wobbled up to the house, keys in hand. Behind me I heard the slap of sneakers on concrete as my new oddball neighbor marched down her driveway and took off around the block. I kept my head down, back to the street as I slipped inside. No way did I want to fall into the small talk trap.

The house was quiet. I checked on my pets—cow, donkey, and goat were outside munching on hay, while the bear was right where I'd left her, in my bed. I slapped together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich—cherry jelly, natural peanut butter, this was Portland, after all—and grabbed my laptop and went to hide in what used to be my parents' closet but was now occupied by the few clothing items Dad owned. In Greece he dressed like a movie star. Here he had always dressed for the role he'd played: truck driver for a local paper products company. Laptop balanced on my lap, mouth full of sandwich, I cruised on over to the Crooked Noses Message Board to scrape the world's seedy underbelly.

Crooked Noses is the biggest gathering place on the internet for amateur sleuths, lookie-loos, and other folks who consider themselves experts on organized crime around the world. Each country with prominent organized crime—dodgy governments don't count—has its own subforum. Lately Greece's subforum has been a hive of activity. To be fair, Grandma gives them a lot to work with.

Because I couldn't call the family to tell them someone sent me an exploding package—probably—without Grandma calling the family equivalent of the National Guard, I figured my best bet was to do

some information gathering behind the scenes. If Greek mafia figures had been receiving boxes of fire and death, I wanted to know. Maybe mine was an isolated incident. Or maybe the package was a coincidence and an unhappy customer had decided to burn the place down. Serving food on newspaper was one step up from serving it on paper money—both had to be teeming with germs just looking for a place to set up a salmonella factory.

I scrolled through the Greek subforum.

Nothing.

I ran a search.

Nothing about exploding mail. Not in the past year, anyway.

Isolated incident. Yay?

With that out of the way, I ran a search for my alleged weight, according to the redheaded cop. Sure enough, some clown had posted a blurry picture of me standing by the compound's pool in a bikini. Either someone in the family had snapped the picture using a potato phone or the compound had a paparazzi problem. For about a week the Crooked Noses had weighed in with their guesses about my weight. Then the conversation took a charming turn toward casual speculation about whether my carpet matched the drapes, or did I install hardwood floors?

The envelope under my username—FarFarAway Girl—lit up. Someone wanted to say hi. I could guess who. BangBang, often the board's voice of reason, and owner of the Crooked Noses, and I casually exchanged messages on a regular basis. I had reason to believe he—or she—knew my real identity, but they'd never outed me. When I discovered he—or she—owned the board I'd logged out and hadn't come back for weeks. Eventually curiosity reeled me back in, and BangBang and I struck up a … whatever it was we had going. Not a friendship exactly. Probably the Germans had a good word for it. Germans had all the best words for universal oddball experiences and feelings.

Rough day? BangBang's message read.

How did you know?

Word gets around. A lot of people have keeping tabs on you since you left Greece.

I lost my job in a fireball. My new boss got decapitated. The police think I'm involved. So yeah, it was a bad day.

For a moment I leaned back, closed my eyes, pretended I was someone with an uncomplicated life. An Instagram influencer, whatever that was. A Pinterest mom. An indoor cat.

I opened one eye. New message from BangBang.

Want to tell me what happened?

Depends. Are you the police? I added a little winky face.

His message was delivered with a grin. *Not always.*

Good enough, I wrote. I gave him the condensed version, including Whyatt's eagerness to open my mail. I skipped the part with my boss's rolling head and missing body.

That's why you were searching the board for package bombs?

There was no denying it. BangBang owned the whole Crooked Noses shebang.

I nodded, then remembered he couldn't see me, so I typed *yes.*

As soon as Homeland Security finds out there was mail involved, things are going to get more complicated, BangBang wrote.

If they find out.

They will.

Yikes. This I needed like I needed another hole in my head—a hole some men, some of them on this board, would no doubt want to stick things in.

It wasn't technically mail. Whyatt said the box was delivered by a courier, not the mailman.

Know anything about the courier?

A man. That's all I know.

The enveloped stayed dark for a long moment before it lit up again. *How are things besides the job and the exploding mail?*

Christmas is coming and I still haven't decorated, plus I need to find a new job before I wind up living under a bridge. The good news is that Portland has oodles of bridges to choose from.

Baboulas would never let that happen.

Grandma wouldn't know. She's so busy at the moment that she can't even find time to burn old shoes with a friend of hers.

I was about to explain the burning-shoe thing in case he didn't know when someone ding-donged the doorbell. What I wouldn't give for some of those attack geese to ward away salespeople.

Except it wasn't salespeople. Standing on the front doorstep were two black suits, one male, one female. A matching set. She had a face like she'd been sucking mothballs, and he had a face like he'd been sucking regular human balls and was undecided about whether or not he enjoyed the experience. They waved a pair of matching badges under my nose, the kind that came in fake leather cases, then the badges vanished back into their pockets.

"Katerina Makris?"

As a kid I got used to people—well meaning adults usually—massacring my name. I tolerated the carnage because grownups get twitchy when kids correct them. Now that I had my own pair of big girl panties I was okay with handing out an education when someone rhymed my last name with *mattress*.

"Makris," I said. "The s is there on the end but it's silent."

“Can we come in?” one of them asked. I think it was the woman. Hard to tell. They were one organization, one mouth, despite having two heads.

“No.”

I stepped out, closed the door behind me. Didn’t want these two thinking hospitality was on the menu.

“If you’re recruiting I’m not interested.”

They exchanged glances. “She thinks we’re recruiting,” he said.

“Cute,” she said.

Nothing about this was cute. My stomach flip-flopped, and I felt barf making casual threats. I kept my cool anyway. Spending time in Greece surrounded by psychopaths, criminals, and other Greeks had strengthened the muscles I needed to stop myself leaping out of a window and escaping via an alley.

“We understand there was an incident at your workplace this morning,” the Woman in Black said.

“If by ‘incident’ you mean it blew up and my boss lost his head, then yes.”

“We have questions,” the Man in Black said. He didn’t elaborate so his *compadre* did the job for him.

“A lot of questions.”

I really wanted them off my porch. “This will go faster if you actually get around to asking them.”

“Hang on just one darn minute there,” Reggie Tubbs called out from his porch. He was in his robe and sweatpants. For once everything was tucked away. “You can’t just go asking her questions without an attorney present. I know you people. Worked with a lot of you in my time.” He rushed over as quickly as a man his age could rush. Things flopped. Other things flapped. From where I was standing, old age appeared to be mostly about skin coming unhitched from its posts. “Okay,” he said, planting himself beside me on the porch. “You can ask your questions now.”

The government suits checked him out. “You an attorney, sir?”

“Was. Then I was a judge. Now I’m a man who has seen some things, so don’t try to dick this girl around. I’m retired but I still know people—not people in nursing homes either.”

“We were hoping to do this in private,” the Man in Black said. Neither of them looked happy about the old judge’s sudden appearance and know-how about the legal system.

“This is pretty private,” I said, which was true enough, except for a brief glimpse of my neighbor from across the street as she performed yet another lap. If she glanced this way it was hard to say behind those big sunglasses. The government suits scoped out the view for a moment, then swung their heads back around. They reminded me of

cows. I should know because I had one.

"Where were you when Hipster Burger exploded?" the woman asked.

"Out the back. I was breaking down boxes for the recycling."

"What was in those boxes?"

"Newspapers."

The black suits looked at me.

Oh. Was I supposed to elaborate? Nobody said anything about elaborating.

"Hipster Burger's shtick was serving food on and in newspapers. I unpacked the 'plates' and took the boxes outside like Whyatt—my boss—asked."

"Did anything unusual happen before that?" the Woman in Black asked.

Neither of them took notes. Was that normal?

"It was Hipster Burger, a lot of things were unusual. On my first day I had to wear a fake mustache. They served dessert deconstructed on old hard drives."

"Not that unusual." The Man in Black nodded like he knew. "Last week I ate at a restaurant where they served breadsticks in a boot. Irony is so common that it's no longer ironic." He and the woman swapped smirks, which made me want to rise up and defend the local hipster community.

"Why are you targeting Miss Makris?" my neighbor asked. "What does any of this have to do with her?"

"Miss Makris was conveniently not in the building when the incendiary device was triggered," the Woman in Black said.

I waved my hands. "I wouldn't have been outside if Whyatt hadn't asked me to unpack the newspapers and toss the boxes."

"You have a history," they said.

They were right; I had a history. Although it was more like the history had me. Trouble regularly accosted me on the street while I was trying to avoid eye contact.

Reggie wagged a finger at them. They didn't know how lucky they were that it was just a finger. "Wait just a darn minute. I've known this once since she was no bigger than your head. You're not gonna find a person with a cleaner history. I know good people and I know bad people, and she's one of the good ones."

Tears threatened to well up. It was nice to know someone was on my side.

The Woman in Black was unmoved. "With all due respect, what do you know about her family, sir?"

"Quit calling me 'sir'. It's Your Honor or Judge Tubbs to you pair of clowns. And don't think I don't know that 'with all due respect'

means without any darn respect whatsoever. So quit pissing down my back and telling me it's raining."

The Woman in Black didn't back down. "Miss Makris here is the granddaughter of Greece's most notorious crime boss, were you aware of that?"

Reggie didn't look one bit impressed or scared. "So what? My daddy was a bootlegger and my grandfather was cross-dressing gigolo back in the day. People do what they've got to do to put food on the table for their families. No shame in that. Are you insinuating that Kat blew up her own place of employment? What proof do you have? Why would she do that? She's been looking for a job and she just found one."

"Your logic has no logic in it," I told them.

They hit me with another question. "Do you know the whereabouts of Mike Makris?"

"Dad?" What did he have to do with this? "He's in Greece."

"For what purpose?"

"You'd have to ask him, but last time I saw him he was eating my grandmother's cooking and spending time with his family."

"Your previous place of employment burned down, correct?"

"As far as I know the Volos Hospital's morgue is fine."

The Woman in Black looked exasperated, like I was five and she was tired of running in verbal circles. It wasn't my fault; her questions were sloppy and disorganized. "Your previous place of employment on American soil."

Oh. That. I couldn't deny it. The old job burned down, along with the apartment building where I'd barely paid the deposit for my first solo place. No one was injured except Bryan, my old boss, who broke his legs falling down stairs. That was all Grandma's doing—she hadn't wanted me to leave Greece—but the rumor was everyone inconvenienced was well compensated. Which didn't make it right, but at least she'd tried. That counted for something, right?

"I wasn't in the country when that happened." At the time I was unconscious in Grandma's plane after Takis and Stavros abducted me. Maybe the suits knew that, maybe they didn't. Either way I wasn't about to bring it up. "Why don't you both just tell me what you want and why you're bugging me, otherwise we're done here."

The Man in Black went to open his mouth, until good ol' Reggie Tubbs stepped in and slapped it shut with a few words.

"You heard the girl. Come back if you've got a real reason to be here and questions that are going someplace other than nowhere, otherwise this is harassment."

The Woman and Man in Black looked at him. They looked at me. They looked at each other. After a whole lot of looking they trotted

back down the driveway, hopped into a black sedan, and sped away.

"I can explain." I slumped against one of the porch's support beams. "Actually, I can't. It's complicated."

"No need," Reggie said. "I've always known what Mike is, the good and the bad if you're picking up what I'm putting down. Isn't that what you kids say today?"

Was he saying he knew Dad was a government agent as well as crown prince to a crime empire run by a woman who was also a government agent? I so needed a chart to keep track of who was who and who knew what.

"It think that was last year," I said.

"Give it a few years," he said. "It'll come round again. It always does."

BY THE TIME I got back to my laptop BangBang had logged off without so much as a *see you later*. I wasn't upset. That's how we were. No hellos. No goodbyes.

My sandwich was still good so I finished it off. I made coffee. I turned on the TV. Channel flicking tugged my guilt strings so I flicked it off and opened my laptop again to hunt for profitable and legal employment opportunities. I tried not to think about Whyatt, his missing head, and how it was maybe—probably—my fault. If the package was addressed to me, someone wanted my head on a restaurant floor, not Whyatt's. His only crimes were curiosity and mail tampering.

A normal person would ask all the normal questions: Why would anyone want to blow me up? Who would want me dead? That sort of thing. But my DNA came with its own Wanted: Dead or Alive poster printed on every gene. Lucky me. The reality was that to Grandma's enemies, killing a granddaughter was a good starting place.

Was I scared? Heck yes. But I couldn't and wouldn't go running to Grandma for protection. I needed to double down on my personal safety. Look over my shoulder more often instead of my phone. Check the backseat and the undercarriage before starting the Jeep's engine. Floss twice a day.

For now I was alive, and as a living person I needed to work.

One new job leaped out from the screen. Phone salesperson for Meow Meow Ruff Pet Food. This I could do. My old job was basically calling people and asking politely for money. Before his company burned down and his legs broke, my old boss had enthusiastically encouraged me to use threats and demands, but those weren't in my wheelhouse. Manners were more my thing. I got results when others

got hang-ups and suggestions about where they could shove their phones.

A single phone call later an interview was all mine.

“One of our employees didn’t show up to work this week.” The receptionist sounded Pepto-Bismol pink. “We sent someone over to check on him and they found him busy being dead. Can you believe it?”

Yes and no. These days I managed to believe at least seven weird or impossible things before breakfast. In my old life I managed one a day, and only when I was scrolling through my Facebook feed.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s terrible.”

“His loss is your gain, am I right?”

So bright. So perky. My teeth ached from all the sweetness and cheer.

“I guess so.” What else could I say?

“Can you be here this afternoon? I know the boss is dying to get someone with experience in customer service. Do you have any acting skills?”

“Is it a requirement?”

“No,” she said, her voice all puppies, rainbows, and fluffy white bunnies. “But I find my shift goes faster if I can pretend my soul isn’t screaming.”

Holy cannoli. So much for her pink personality.

Did I really want to work at this place?

All signs pointed to yes. I needed the money. For screaming souls there were chips, wine, and Netflix.

Chapter 5

GRANDMA CALLED on the way to my interview. I was stuck in traffic when her face—a face that was a geologist's dream come true—came at me all the way from Greece to the mount on the dash. She didn't waste time.

"Tell me about this explosion at your job."

"How did you find out? Wait—Marika?"

"Marika, the news, and all the eyes and ears that watch and listen to the world when I cannot."

"You didn't do it, did you?"

"Why would I do that?"

"To manipulate me into flying back to Greece?"

She made a face. The ravines in her tan, leathery skin shifted. "Not this time."

"Must have been a dissatisfied Hipster Burger customer then." I didn't mention the package. Dad would blab eventually anyway.

"Your father said somebody sent you a package at your job before it exploded."

Well, well, well, Dad had blabbed sooner rather than later. Probably because he was scared of Grandma.

"Maybe. Maybe not. It's hard to say with the whole explosion thing destroying all the evidence."

"I will send somebody—"

"No! Don't do that. I want a nice quiet life without henchmen and other assorted people who can clean guns and cook *sisa* in their sleep."

Sisa is Greek meth. It's the cheapest illicit drug money can buy in Greece, which is why so much of it sells.

"Nobody should cook *sisa* while they are sleeping," Grandma said. "Is very dangerous."

The car ahead of me shot forward. I hit the gas. Things were moving again.

"Can't talk," I said. "I'm on my way to another job interview. Don't send anybody, okay? If you do I'll feed them to my bear. Especially don't send Takis. He'll give her the runs."

Fifteen minutes later I turned right into a parking lot outside a warehouse near the airport. From the outside it looked like a great place to hide an extensive collection of frozen heads. Weeds slithered up and out between the ground's cracks. A cold wind whipped across the blacktop, reminding me that this was winter and I should be at

home with hot chocolate in one hand and a remote in the other. The sign above the door told me I had the right place. No mistake—this warehouse was home to Meow Meow Ruff Pet Food's call center.

I went in.

Meow Meow Ruff Pet Food's customer assistance consisted of two dozen cubicles, a table with a coffee maker, sugar, powdered creamer, and a couple of boxes of the sad powdered doughnuts gas stations sell. The Pepto pink receptionist with existential dread was a woman in mom jeans and a puffy vest. A devout cookie baker, whose addiction of choice was hand sanitizer, judging from the cookie crumbs dotting her lower lip and the half-empty gallon-sized bottle of sanitizer on her desk.

"Please tell me you're Katerina," she said brightly. Her voice said *sunshine*. Her eyes said *kill me now*.

I raised my hand. "Guilty."

"Did you bring a gun?"

"Was I supposed to?"

"Arsenic?"

"Safeway was all out."

"Any idea what else can kill you?"

"That hand sanitizer if you drink enough of it, I think."

"I already tried that. All it did was give me the hiccups and make me think I was a poodle." The phone rang. She answered it with a neon pink "Meow Meow Ruff, how can I help you?" Maintaining eye contact with me she drew an invisible line across her throat. *Kill me*, she mouthed. When she was done, she offered me the sanitizer bottle.

"Thanks, but I'm trying to quit."

"Trust me, you'll want it."

On that ominous note I decided to lather up. "Who do I see about the interview?"

"You'll find the boss at the last cubicle. Whenever you're ready."

I was as ready as I was going to get. Hands cooling fast with a dollop of gel on them, I set off for the end cubicle. My brain worked on my introduction. So far all I had was "Hello, I'm Katerina."

"Kat!"

My head jerked up. My inner monologue quit. I recognized that voice. I knew the face that went with it. The walker? That was new.

"Bryan!" I said, happy and shocked to see my old boss. "You work here?"

Bryan is in his fifties but in his mind he's still a frat boy. He pops his polo shirt collars and wears his hair spiked in a faux-hawk. Before the "accident" he'd played golf like it was his religion.

He stood up. Well, he tried. There was a lot of fumbling involved, and him waving my hands away when I tried to help. But finally he

was up on his feet. He held both arms up in the air. Then he wobbled and had to grip the walker. “I’m king of the world! Meow Meow Ruff Pet Food is my business—well, the customer service part. The food part happens in China, and to be honest I don’t ask too many questions about that. Although there was that one investigative reporter who claimed Meow Meow Ruff was made of ground corpses and the Chinese mob were using it as a front to ditch their enemies and solve their overpopulation issues, one bag of kibble at a time. Not long after he went missing a pair of glasses showed up in a roll of wet dog food. The lady called here, wondering if anyone was missing a pair and could she keep them. I said ‘yes’ because I didn’t know what else to say.”

My eye twitched. “I thought the insurance company wouldn’t pay up after the other place burned down.”

“Funny story. Well, not funny exactly, but it definitely was convenient. They decided to pony up the cash about a month ago, and that’s the story of how I went into business with Meow Meow Ruff. So are you coming back to work for me?”

Was I? Meow Meow Ruff Pet Food was a step backward into my past. But it paid better than Hipster Burger, which was currently paying zero dollars.

“Yes? I mean, I think so.”

“Great! The good news is that you don’t have to threaten people here at Meow Meow Ruff. Not unless they mention things like lawyers and exposés. Then I don’t mind if you put your steel cap boots on. But day-to-day, being nice is the way to go. Most of the people who call are old and just want somebody to talk to about Muffy or Rex.”

“Be nice to lonely people. Got it.”

Bryan inched out of the cubicle with his walker. I stepped aside so I wouldn’t trip the man. “My physical therapist assures me I probably won’t need this for the rest of my life. The way my bones broke I wound up with a lot of nerve damage. Did you know I can smack my big toe with a hammer and feel nothing? Other times pulling on a sock is like shoving it in the devil’s butthole.”

“Maybe you should stick to sandals?”

He clicked his fingers, wobbling as his legs tried to compensate for the balance problem. “Great idea! Come on. We’ve got a cubicle ready and waiting for you. Well, it was waiting for Ted, but Ted’s dead.”

The promised cubicle was three down on the other side. There was no window but I had a fantastic view of the last guy’s kinks. Wall to wall pictures of barely legal women licking lollipops. Red ones, mostly.

“Can I redecorate?”

“Yeah, yeah. Of course. Do whatever you like with the place.

There's just one thing."

"What?"

He stuck a finger in the air. "Listen."

Okay, sure, why not. I listened. Then I heard it. Until now I hadn't realized I was standing in a sea of Indian accents.

"I get it," I said. "I'm the minority hire."

He pointed at me. He wobbled. He quit pointing and used both hands to grip the walker. "Wrong. Nobody here is Indian."

"Isn't that racist or weird or both?"

He shrugged it off. "It's what people expect these days when they dial the number on the back of a packet. Give them what they want. It's just acting. Can you do it?"

So that's what the receptionist meant about acting skills.

I winced. "I can try."

"I have faith in you."

That made one of us.

By the end of the shift I'd answered fifty calls and assured half the callers that their favorite character on their favorite soap opera was only temporarily dead. Death was never The End on a soap opera. Somehow they always came back—often after a prolonged period disguised as another character. I'd read the ingredients list from the bag of Meow Meow Ruff's Krazy Kitten Mix to two old ladies who couldn't find their glasses, but then found them dangling around their necks. I'd answered several questions about my citizenship and right to be in the country. And I'd assured one caller that Meow Meow Ruff wouldn't make her dog sprout an extra leg, even though she'd discovered several glowing particles in the Mostly Meat mix. Afterward I felt guilty, so I called her back and urged her to swap it for another brand, just in case her dog wouldn't do well as a five-legged animal.

"Great accent," Bryan said, shuffling over with his walker.

"Thanks. I picked it up when a real Indian call center accused me of stealing my own identity."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Aye-aye," I said.

The receptionist was packing up to head home. "Do you want to die yet?"

"Not yet."

"You will. We all want to die in here. Bryan should do us all a favor and park in here with the engine going." She smiled her World's Happiest Mom smile at me. "Have a great evening! See you in the morning! If I don't hang myself."

I ARRIVED home to discover someone had vandalized Mom and Dad's house while I was faking an Indian accent. Although, could I really call it vandalism? The house and front yard were decked out with Christmas lights. A herd of lighted reindeer blinked on and off. Santa's sleigh was piled high with LED packages. Someone had decorated. Someone who wasn't me. Unless this was the result of an Ambien trip. No—I'd never taken Ambien, I was sure of it.

What if I'd forgotten the Ambien?

I sat in the driveway silently debating with long-dead philosophers, engine running so I didn't freeze, until Reggie thunked a knuckle on the window. I rolled it down. "What happened here?" I asked him.

He swung around to check out the decorations. "You didn't do this? And here I thought you hired those guys to decorate the place nice and fancy."

"Nope. Wasn't me. I don't suppose you saw who did it?"

"Sure, I saw them, but there's no way of knowing who they were. The black van didn't have a business name on it. It was just four guys with a whole lot of Christmas decorations in the back of the van. I figured you decided to go ahead and do the decorating anyway, after we talked about it. Say, you want to come in for a hot cocoa and look at pictures of my knob? I'm trying to figure out the best one to upload to my dating profile." He pulled his robe together tighter. "Aww heck, maybe I'll post them all. Broads like to see what they're getting."

I shook my head and thanked him. Faking an accent on the phone all day had fried my throat. All I wanted was Netflix time and a stack of Grandma's baking. Netflix I could do. The baked goods, not so much. Instead I had a pocketful of sad powdered doughnuts that tasted like depression.

Maybe Dad had organized for the lights and decorations to go up in his absence. It was the middle of the night in Greece so I sent him a text message and approached the front door with my keys fanned between my fingers and a stun gun disguised as a lipstick in the other. I'd pilfered the stun gun from an NIS agent's handbag. The NIS is Greece's CIA. Still nestled at the bottom of the bag was the glitter bomb that same agent had given me freely. Probably it didn't work and that's why she gave it to me.

Slowly, carefully, I unlocked the door and eased it open.

I closed it again.

Then opened it.

And went in.

Someone had put the tree up—the same tree that lived in the garage eleven months out of the year. The ornaments were in place. The star was at the tippy top. Colored lights danced on the living room walls. The mystery decorator hadn't stopped there. The stairs

were adorned with garlands and Christmassy bows. A beautiful nativity set that I'd never seen before occupied the mantle over the fireplace.

Christmas had come here to vomit.

It was perfect.

Except, like the display outside, none of it was my doing.

A shiver started at the base of my spine, rippling upward until I was one big shudder. Someone else had been in my home. Altruism or not, I wasn't cool with this. Not when I went out of my way to lock the doors and windows and keep a bear in my house. Did I need to upgrade to tigers?

I called the non-emergency police number. Because I wasn't being murdered, a lone policeman showed up an hour later, bored out of his skull and ready dismiss whatever was about to come out of my mouth.

"You called about …"

"Christmas decorations." I swept my hand at the tree, at the deer outside, at everything that wasn't the way I'd left it this morning. "Someone did this."

"Put up your tree?"

"Yes."

"And decorated?"

"Yes."

"Looks nice. Real Christmassy."

"Yes, but also no. Someone who wasn't me came in here and did all this."

He stared into the brightly lit abyss again. "Looks like someone did you a favor. Unless you're an atheist. Are you an atheist?"

I have issues with God. He was busy planning natural disasters back when I was praying He'd let Mom live. Now I do my best to ignore Him when we pass each other on the street.

"I'm afraid of commitment," I said, "so I respect all the sides and hope I'm covered."

He didn't hear me. Too busy gawking. Despite the gun in his holster and the badge that said he was the law around these here parts, he looked haunted. "Say, is that a bear?"

I glanced over my shoulder to see my bear staggering down the stairs. Someone was on a berry hunt. Her eyes lit up. She sniffed the air. In the absence of berries and salmon this nice—but ultimately useless—policeman would do.

"Dog," I said.

"Dog?"

"*Woof woof*."

"I know dogs. Dogs don't come in that size."

"Sure they do. This one is a cross between a Newfoundland and a

Great Dane. When she was born she was already the size of a sofa. Her poor mother."

He took off, peeling away from the curb at a speed that would have scored a regular person a speeding ticket.

So much for my intruder with decorating issues.

To the couch I went. Except the couch was currently occupied by my bear, who'd decided *against* the police hors d'oeuvre and *for* snoozing on the couch. That left one of two chairs for me. I scrunched down in my chosen chair, knees to chin, and whipped out my phone. Melas had called while I was working. Now it was too early to return his call.

Greece and I were out of sync.

I stared at the ceiling for a solid hour. I'd been staring at it a lot lately. Even with my own mini zoo the house felt big, empty. Had I made a mistake?

No. This was what I'd wanted. Sanity. No constant game of cops and robbers, where I wasn't sure which were the goodies and which were the baddies.

What about someone sending you exploding mail? the voice in my head said. And what about those notes? Your life is a disaster. Call Grandma. She can make all this go away. Plus she makes Greek cookies.

My stomach growled. It remembered Grandma's cookies.

"No," I told it. "No cookies for you."

I hit the internet and ordered a pizza. Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang.

Boy, that was service.

I slid over in my socks, feeling taller than Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*, and yanked open the door.

It wasn't pizza.

"You're not a pizza," I said.

The man on the porch peered over my shoulder. "Animal Control. A cop buddy of mine told me you had a bear stashed away here."

I opened the door wide so he could get a load of the bear on couch. "Does she look stashed away?"

He gnawed on that a moment. "She looks pretty damn comfortable if you ask me."

"You're not going to take her?"

"Not me. I don't do bears. I just wanted to see if it was true."

The bear raised her head. Her nose twitched.

"Oh shit," he said and took off. Boy, people around these parts were weird about bears.

Pizza came. Secure in the knowledge that I was gainfully employed, I wolfed down three slices, then a fourth for good luck.

Yoga pants don't complain about overeating the way jeans do, so without any buttons to pop, I flopped down on the pillows and flicked over to the local news. Firefighters were battling a blazing building. T'was the season for cats who knocked over candles, and other pyromaniacs. The place looked like a goner. Good thing it wasn't somebody's house.

"… Home to the Meow Meow Ruff Pet Food Company …" the perky, toothy anchor was saying.

Holy crap in a chamber pot. I gawked at the television.

"… Arrested for arson …"

As I watched, they flicked over to a shot of Bryan, my former and current boss, in handcuffs, doing his best to work the walker. "I didn't do it!" he yelled. The camera shifted to a toothy field reporter with the requisite sock bun and North Face coat conducting an interview with Meow Meow Ruff's receptionist.

"It was only a matter of time," she said cheerfully. "We all wanted to die—even Bryan. I wouldn't be surprised if he snapped and accidentally-on-purpose dropped a match. If he did it, he did us all a favor. Although now I suppose I have to find another job."

Mind racing, I flopped back in the chair. Where was a bookie when I needed one? What were the odds on two of my work places burning down within twenty-four hours of each other?

"Fifty-fifty," Takis said when I called Marika to ask. It was morning there now. Barely.

"That high?" I said, dismayed.

"There are people who want you to suffer and die, in that order, because of who you are," he said.

Wow, that was cheery. But I was unsurprised. It only confirmed what I already knew. "They don't even know me."

"So? People do not have to know a person to hate them. Imagine how much they would hate you if they knew you." He cackled until Marika's hand appeared from off-screen and slapped the back of his head. "Ouch! *Gamo* …what are you doing, woman?"

Marika snatched her phone back from him. "I will spit in his *patates* later."

I left them to their bickering and grabbed supplies before climbing the ladder to the roof again. The night was cloudy and cold. After the double whammy of mysteriously appearing Christmas decorations and my new-new job burning to the ground, I was jumpy.

Through binoculars I scanned the neighborhood. Eleven o'clock and everything looked normal.

I didn't trust the night one bit. Someone was out there putting up decorations, setting fires, blowing up stuff, and sending me mean notes. Maybe not the same somebody. Maybe at least two somebodies.

What if there were more?

How long would Greece chase me when I didn't want to be chased?

My phone rang. Even Melas's handsome face couldn't warm me up tonight.

"You on the roof again?"

"What gave it away?"

"The stars and the shivering."

"I'm not shivering."

Lies. I was totally shivering.

"Tell me what's wrong." His voice dipped down to that low, warm place that reminded me of cozy fireplaces, hot chocolate, furry throws, and not many clothes. Parts of me started tingling. Parts that moments ago had been too cold and too shaky to be interested in men.

"Fine," I grumbled, and told him all about it.

When I was done he was silent—probably because up until now he hadn't been able to get a word in edgeways.

"Say something," I said.

"Okay."

Time passed. A lot of time. I waited for more words to join their unaccompanied pal. *Nada*.

"Was that it?"

He rubbed his forehead like it was a lamp and he was hoping for a genie with a bouquet of wishes. "Come home. At least we can protect you here."

"I am home."

"Are you?"

His question poked me in a place I didn't want to be poked. I did what cornered animals did: I deflected. "Did your mother and Grandma burn shoes yet?"

He gave me a funny look. "No."

"What?"

"Mama spoke with her, and Kyria Katerina gave her some excuse. Said she was sick."

Fear rippled through me. Was Grandma's cancer back? She'd fought the big C before and won … although she'd exaggerated and prolonged certain aspects of the illness to manipulate her enemies. There was no denying Grandma and the rest of the family had been weird lately. What was going on that I didn't know about?

"Sick?"

"A cold. Nothing too serious."

I relaxed. A bit. Even a persistent cold could take down someone Grandma's age. "She sounded fine when I spoke to her."

Across the street, my new neighbor approached her house, arms

swinging, home from another walk. She paused at the end of the driveway for several long moments, then let herself in through the front door. The porch light flicked off. Another moment later, the curtains went dark.

From up here I got a good gander at all kinds of things. Prowling cats. Flashing Christmas lights. An ownerless dog pooping on a lawn that wasn't mine. A black van parked around the corner, out of the streetlight's range.

Had it been there earlier? Reggie mentioned a black van, four men, and a whole Christmas worth of decorations. Was this the same van? The coincidence was too coincidence-y for my liking.

"Kyria Katerina should send someone to watch you," Melas was saying. "I cannot believe she sent you alone. She was irresponsible, and that woman did not get to where she is by being irresponsible."

"Why does everyone have a problem with that?" I grumbled. "I'm fine. I'm safe. Yes, there was one explosion that killed my boss, and one fire that led to the arrest of my other boss, but I'm fine. Probably it's a coincidence. Fires happen all the time."

"And explosions?"

"Those happen all the time too."

"Now, sure. But before you came to Greece, when was the last time you saw or heard an explosion?"

"Does July 4th count?"

He sidestepped my quip, probably because he was a cop and cops take things like explosions and fires and deaths seriously. "Come back to Greece or get a bodyguard. Please. I do not want anything to happen to you. I like you, and my world would be a worse place without you in it."

"Because Kyria Mela thinks I'll be her grandchildren's mother someday?"

"If you are lucky." He said it with a half smile and a full dose of seduction. I didn't bite. My attention was laser focused on that van.

In my experience—and boy, did I have some these days—black vans meant trouble of the law enforcement variety or the Family kind. I already had government agents sniffing around. No way would I be surprised if they put me under surveillance, hoping to shake a laundry list of crimes out of me.

But what about the Christmas decorations? Law enforcement didn't provide that particular service. Family, on the other hand—my family in particular—excelled at certain services, especially if someone needed killing—say, a dealer who shortchanged them, or a rival who decided to ooze over the edges of their designated territory. But did they provide a decorating service? Probably not. I didn't have old shoes for them to burn.

I tried to concentrate on Melas, which was harder than it should have been.

"I like the world with me in it, too. And I like that you like me being in the world. Hold on a minute." I stuffed my phone down my coat, into the neck of my sweater.

"What are you doing? It got dark."

"You're in my sweater and I'm climbing down the ladder."

He made a low growling sound. "I like being inside your sweater."

Forget shivering—his growls made me sweat.

"Pervert," I said with far more nonchalance than I felt.

"Woman, you have no idea."

Winter got hot fast. I was this close to being distracted from my mission. "Cool it. I have a thing to do."

"Tell me it involves taking that sweater off."

I laughed. "Quiet. I have to be super secret."

"Then can you take the sweater off?"

I slipped through the side gate, doing my best to be stealthy. "Quiet or I'll mute you."

"Okay, okay, I will be quiet."

He was true to his word as I casually avoided the streetlights' bright halos. Thankfully the neighbors had slacked off on the greenery pruning over the cooler months, which helped with camouflage. I tried to blend. Mostly I succeeded. I saw nobody and nobody saw me except one of the neighbors' cats. The tuxedo kitty watched me sidle up to the black van before scampering away. Probably it was embarrassed for me.

After a long dramatic moment where I stood in the shadows staring at the van, I scooted closer.

Regular Oregon plates. New or newish, judging from the condition of the paint and the body style. Good tires. No decals. No phones number. So why was it here, loitering on my suburban street? We weren't a black unmarked van neighborhood.

Holy goats, I sounded Greek. Most likely the van belonged to a neighbor or a neighbor's friend or family. Christmas was the season for visitors, welcome and unwelcome. Chances were this particular black van had nothing to do with the van that spat out four men and an overabundance of Christmas cheer. Chances were some nice person with four or more kids wasn't a fan of SUVS or minivans so they had opted for this shiny black abduction vehicle. No big deal.

That didn't stop me peering through the passenger window. My transformation into a Greek security camera was almost complete.

The van was as empty as empty gets. Showroom clean. No discarded fast food wrappers littering the unremarkable interior. No paper cups wedged in the cup holders. No sign of guns, knives, or

surveillance equipment.

Neat freak, or a sign of psychopathy?

"Check this out," I said, pulling Melas out of my bra. I angled the phone this way and that so he could take the whole thing in. I wanted a professional opinion.

"What am I looking at?"

"Van."

"Looks like a van to me."

"A suspicious van or a regular van?"

"A big van. You could transport a lot of livestock in a van like that."

"Is that your professional opinion?"

"Americans drive big cars."

"Not so much in Portland. Our parking spaces are tiny and we're trying to save the planet, one Toyota Prius at a time."

A car swung around the corner. I put my head down and faked power walking back to the house. Safer to grill Melas indoors where there were no witnesses. I got the door and stopped.

An envelope clung to the painted wood, dangling from a single strip of tape.

How long had it been there? Sometime between pizza arriving and now, someone had skulked up the path, sidled up to the house, and slapped mail to my door. Without me hearing so much as a footstep.

I ripped it open and read my fortune.

Choke on a bag of donkey dicks, you stinky skank.

Wow. As far as fortunes went that sucked. I was hoping for something more upbeat and encouraging. Plus it was a lie. I didn't stink. My post-Greece funk didn't extend to skipping daily showers.

A freeze that wasn't winter's fault rippled along my spine, radiating outwards until I shivered. I looked around. The street was dead. Not a single light on in Reggie's place. Even my weird power-walking neighbor had quit pounding the sidewalk for the night. It was just me. Alone.

"Katerina?" Melas said.

Alone-ish.

"Still here." My tongue felt numb, and it was suddenly hogging up too much real estate in my mouth. "What did you make of it? The van, I mean."

"Besides being big and clean?"

"Did you notice any details?"

"The driver is tall. The seat was pushed all the way back."

"I haven't seen any tall people around lately."

True story. Everyone in the neighborhood was average or lower. The tallest guy I knew was Xander, and he wasn't here. Probably he

was off doing henchman stuff. Or government spy stuff. With Xander it could be both. Xander, Grandma, and Dad, all wore multiple hats at the same time.

"I would laugh and call you paranoid but your workplace burned down—twice."

I groaned. "Me having to find yet another job isn't the worst thing about this, but it's definitely a thing."

"You have a job here. Gus never stops talking about you."

Before I could pitch my rebuttal, an incoming call cut me off.

"Grandma," I said. "Talk later?"

"Later. If she offers to send someone, accept her help." He vanished, leaving me staring at Grandma's best stink-eye.

"Another explosion, Katerina?"

"Relax," I said, not feeling remotely relaxed. "It was a regular old fire this time. No boom."

"That does not make me feel better."

"But does it make you feel warmer?"

She stared at me. Hard. Until the air between here and there had the permeability of a colander.

"I am sending someone."

"We've had this conversation. We've had it so many times that we could have it in our sleep. You're not sending anybody."

"They would be discreet. Nobody would know they are there until it was too late for them."

"That's the thing, Grandma. I came back here so I wouldn't be thrust into any mandatory bodyguard situations. Yes, there was an explosion. Yes, there was a tiny fire that burned down a whole warehouse. But have I been shot at? Kidnapped? Has anyone faked my death?" I took a deep breath and lied out of my tush. "Explosions and fires don't bother me. I was in the wrong jobs at the wrong time. Actually, I was in the wrong job but in the right place because that warehouse went up in flames after I left." I suddenly remembered what Melas said about Grandma's health. "Are you sick?"

"What?"

"Sick. Are you sick? Melas's mother said you dodged the shoe burning because you were sick."

"*Po-po* … that was nothing. I told her I had a cold. Do you know how many years Helena and I have been burning shoes together? Too many. This year I wanted to do something different. I made up an excuse. At my age I cannot say it is woman problems."

"Really?"

"I am fine, which is more than I can say for my only granddaughter. Go nowhere. I will send somebody to watch over you."

"What's that?" I said. "You're breaking up."

Tap. I ended the call and dropped the phone on the end table in the living room. On the television the nightly news had moved on. Not me. I was stuck in the past—ten minutes in the past to be precise when I'd plucked that envelope off the door. Were the messages and the fires connected, or was I dealing with two crazies? That's if the fires had anything to do with me at all. Coincidences usually weren't coincidences at all, but what if this time they were?

So far I had a pile of notes, including this one. All of them vaguely threatening but light on details. Was the note-writer planning to kill me? Or was this one of those situations where they'd wait for convenient opportunity to strike? Clap their hands if a bus hit me? Cheer if lightning used me as a target?

I had too many questions, no answers, and an overabundance of people who wanted me back in Greece. But I did have a seasonally cheerful house and yard, thanks to a mysterious yet creepy benefactor.

A packet in the kitchen rattled.

My goat was cruising the pantry for something softer than canned goods.

I led him back to the garage. That was another thing I had too much of: pets. Many—if I wanted to be grammatically correct about it. But the pets were company. Not good company exactly. More like something warm and living to fill the dark corners of the house I'd known my whole life.

I shoveled another slice of pizza into my pie hole.

NEW DAY, new job interview. This one was for a local no-kill pet shelter. What could be better than spending the day cuddling with puppies and kittens before they went off to their forever homes?

Who was I kidding? Probably I'd be their best customer.

"So, do you like animals?" the interviewer wanted to know. Betsy was an elf in a Christmas sweater and thick glasses. Animal hair freckled her outfit from head to toe. Either she didn't own a lint brush or she didn't care. We were in a room filled with litter boxes and cat trees and a hundred cats that ranged from bored to homicidal. A marmalade kitty the size of a loaf wanted me to die. The teeth lodged in my ankle sank in deeper until they hit bone. I wanted to shake him off but I needed the job. "Because it's really important that you like animals," she went on.

"I love animals," I said through the pain tears. "I have three of my own at home."

Her face lit up. "Oooh … what do you have? Cats? Dogs? Let me

guess. You look like a cat person."

"A goat, a donkey, and … another one."

Her forehead scrunched. "Another donkey?"

"Sure, let's go with that."

Betsy peered down her nose at my resume, which was sparse. I'd updated it this morning before fleeing the house. All the decorations made me twitchy and uncomfortable. They were a reminder that someone managed to break into my house.

"What happened with Hipster Burger?"

"I only worked there a day."

"Why?"

"It exploded."

"And Meow Meow Ruff Pet Food?"

"It burned down."

She glanced at the resume. "And both of these were this week?" Her voice wobbled out, high and neurotic.

"They were on the news," I said. The marmalade loaf changed tactics. He decided my leg was a scratching post.

Betsy crumpled up my resume and dropped it in a nearby litter box. "Oops, would you look at that. The job is magically unavailable."

"Unavailable?"

"Someone else got the job."

I peered past her. "Who?"

"You can't see them but they exist, I swear."

"For the record, I don't believe you."

"The door is that way," she said in a snobby voice, like she wasn't covered in animal hair. "And leave Mr. Peabody here."

Mr. Peabody wasn't going anywhere without my leg. I raised my foot and waited while Betsy unhooked his claws. She hugged the cat to her chest while he seethed. "You won't be dying in a fire, will you Mr. Peabody? Betsy won't let a thing happen to her ickle bickle kitty baby boy."

I bolted before Mr. Peabody unleashed his claws and turned her face to raw souvlaki.

I GRUMBLED BACK to the Jeep and kept up my inner monologue all the way home. What did I have to do to get a job and keep it around here? Employment never used to be this difficult—or this incendiary.

Ignoring the inflatable snowman on the porch and the skirt of blow-up presents around its bottom snowball, I unlocked the front door and slipped inside. And stopped. Again.

This was becoming a habit.

I walked back out and tried again, in case I'd fallen into a parallel universe.

Guess who had two thumbs and wasn't that lucky?

Me. It was me.

The problem was this. Some thoughtful soul had propped up a corpse against my Christmas tree—the Christmas tree I didn't construct and decorate to begin with. The dead man sat back to the trunk, head between a cluster of silver bells and a glass pickle, his skin a gray shade of colorless. Probably in his twenties. Putty-colored hair that formed a grubby helmet on his scalp. Same hair freckling his chin and sprawling down his neck, vanishing into a sweatshirt that had recently lost a fight with a pack of wolves. His bottom half was hidden under a chenille blanket that stopped being trendy in 1979. And he had the audacity to be dead in my house. My house. A strictly no-corpses-allowed zone because I desperately wanted—needed—a life of no crime whatsoever.

"Hello?"

The dead man, predictably, said nothing.

"Are you dead?"

The dead man kept on being dead.

Obviously he hadn't arrived here on his own. Like an abandoned baby or puppy, he came with a note pinned to his sweatshirt. The note came with a local phone number and a helpful message. *Call if you need help.*

I did what a normal person would do—not what I would do.

Post-Greece me wanted to call Grandma or Takis or Xander, someone with the power and the vehicle to make a dead body disappear without alerting the authorities, because nothing makes law enforcement more curious than an unexpected corpse in a mobster's granddaughter's house. A normal person's first call is to the police because they've got nothing to hide.

Defying all my Makris instincts, I called 9-1-1 … after I plucked the note off the dead man's sweatshirt and stuck it in my pocket.

Then I went outside to wait.

Chapter 6

EVERYBODY SHOWED UP. The police. The feds. Several of my neighbors who wanted to see a dead body that wasn't anybody they knew or cared about. A handful of outside cats who took off after I chased them away from the Christmas tree with a broom.

The badges stood around the tree, contemplating the body. Nobody wanted to touch it. Homeless, they decided. Best leave touching him to the professionals. Never mind that they were the professionals and had badges to prove it.

For crying out loud.

I bent down and touched the man's neck. No pulse. His skin was on the cold side of room temperature. "Dead," I said. "As dead as dead gets. Now do something about it!"

"You can't just touch him!" one of the cops said. "You're tampering with a murder scene!"

The officer rigged up a perimeter of yellow tape while his partner tried to grill me on the couch. The feds stepped in.

"She's ours," the Woman in Black said. Like last time, the dastardly duo were suited up for an alien invasion and a movie deal. Only things missing were the black sunglasses and the doodad to wipe and replace memories, and I was semi-confident the bulges in their pockets were sunglasses.

"Kat isn't saying a word to any of you," Reggie Tubbs said. He was in his robe with the belt tied and sneakers on his feet. Very formal for him.

I zipped my lips and tossed the away the invisible key.

That's when then the paramedics showed up with their stretcher and medical equipment. They ignored the tape and crouched down beside the dead man, feeling him up until I wasn't sure if what they were doing was legal or appropriate. They looked up at the cops.

"Dummy," one of them said.

The paramedics stood up and rolled out the door.

Every head in the living room swiveled in my direction.

"It looks real!" I said. "You all thought it was real, too. Don't tell me you didn't."

"The girl is right," Reggie said. "Looks real enough that none of you stooges would even touch the thing. Go on now. Get out of here. Don't you have homes to go to?"

The neighbors filtered out. Complaining about lost time, the cops

left. On the way out they made plans to hit up Voodoo Doughnuts. The Woman and Man in Black lingered like the smell of microwaved popcorn.

"We're watching you," the woman said. "Put a toe out of line and we'll see that toe and throw it in a cell in a facility no one knows exists."

"If no one knows it exists, then how do you know about it?" I asked "We're no one," she said. "We know everything."

Long-dead philosophers rolled in their graves.

"Sounds like a threat to me," Reggie said. "Get out before I call your boss."

The Woman in Black flashed two rows of Chiclet veneers. "Our boss doesn't exist. Not to you."

"But she exists to us," the Man in Black felt compelled to add. I had a feeling he was the dimly lit one.

They hoofed it back to the vehicle and sped away.

I shot Reggie a grateful smile—but not too grateful because I didn't want to wind up on the wrong end of his flashing. "What am I supposed to do with this dummy?"

"You ever see *Die Hard*?"

"Best Christmas movie ever."

He grinned. "Can't argue with that. Stick a gray sweatshirt on him. Sit him on the porch. Use him as a threat."

"Now I have a machine gun. Ho-ho-ho."

"Atta girl," he said. He turned to leave then stopped. "Next time those feds show up I'm gonna show them my junk. Uptight, the pair of them. They could use a good flashing by a guy who knows the law better than they do."

Under the circumstances—circumstances being that the retired judge was firmly on Team Kat—I didn't point out that wiener waving is illegal in most places, even Oregon.

"You think they'll be back?"

"They can't help themselves."

We diverged at the mailbox. He went left. I stayed to check the mail. The woman across the street pounded the pavement with her sneakers on the way past.

"Nice day for a walk," I called out.

She pointed to her wrist. "Trying to get a personal best."

Off she marched.

Watching her made me feel like a slug. Greece overfed me, yes, but I was always on the move. Oregon sat me on the couch with Netflix, chips, and no purpose.

Walking. I should try that. Walking was normal. Walking would make a change from dodging bullets.

I poked through my closet. I ditched the interview outfit and tugged on a pair of yoga pants, shoved my feet into sneakers, wriggled into a sweatshirt, and topped off the whole outfit with a coat and wool hat.

Dressed for exercise success, I started off down the street at a moderate pace. From the way my heart was banging around I could tell it was confused about this change. At home I'd reverted to my gelatinous state.

This was good. This was fitness.

Oh gods, was it over yet?

My phone rang, interrupting the Top 40 in my ears. A local caller. Vaguely familiar number—but not someone in my Contacts.

Probably I'd live to regret my decision—I was feeling all fit and happy about the direction my life was going: back toward home—but I answered the call anyway.

"Kat? Is this still your number?"

Also vaguely familiar? The voice on the other end. I knew the man, but how?

The past flooded back the way the past usually does, in embarrassing, humiliating Technicolor chunks—although usually at around 3 AM when I can't sleep. Ugh.

"What do you want, Todd?"

"You still have my number in your phone?"

There was a smile in his voice. Why was there a smile in his voice? Considering how we'd ended—with a penis lodged in his throat—and considering how many times I'd imagined him in unfortunate situations—chipper shredder, meat grinder, tied to the MAX tracks—the smile in his voice was presumptuous and downright cocky.

"Once more with feeling: What do you want, Todd?"

The confidence fell out of his voice. "I was just checking to see how you were doing. I heard about the explosion at Hipster Burger."

"You and everyone else who watches the news."

He sighed. "Can you chill—"

"No."

"—out?"

"Still no."

"I wanted to offer an olive branch."

"Why? So I can whip you with it? Go ahead."

"We were friends once. I was hoping we could be friends again, now that you've had time to get over me."

I laughed. Boy, Todd was a comedian. Who knew? Certainly not me when I was wearing his ring. "No thanks. I have enough friends."

"I was also hoping we could talk."

Was he high? I had to ask. "Are you high?"

"Kat, please?"

"Oh, well, since you said please …" Here I was, rolling out my best sarcasm, and Todd mistook it for acquiescence.

"Meet outside the Cheesecake Factory?" he said.

This close to Christmas the Cheesecake Factory is guaranteed to be a zoo. Its primo location at the Washington Square Mall means shoppers flock there to refuel with slabs of cheesecake. When the restaurant is half full the acoustics are lousy. At full capacity, Todd's lips could move but ambient chatter would smother his words. Plus they had cheesecake. It was right there in the name.

"Fine." I dragged the word out so far that even Todd couldn't miss the sarcasm this time.

We agreed to meet in an hour. I didn't bother changing clothes or slapping on basic makeup. He wasn't worth the eyeliner.

When it was time to leave, my phone rang.

Todd again. "Can you pick me up?"

"I don't think so."

A voice burbled in the background, male and terse.

"Can you still meet me, then? Francis is going to give me a ride.

Yeah, I just bet he was. "Fine."

I backed out of the driveway. My neighbor was charging around the block, swinging her arms. Still or again? It was hard to tell with her. Around the corner a second black van had snugged up behind the first. My forehead began to sweat like a piece of cheese left on the counter.

TWENTY MINUTES later I was crossing Washington Square Mall's parking lot with my head down, trying to pretend like I didn't see Todd. Today's suit was rumpled and he was carrying his messenger bag over one shoulder. He never left home without the bag. It was good leather, probably unicorn the way he treated it. Nothing about him gave me butterflies the way he used to. All I felt was nothing—nothing and irritation.

A smile flashed across his face when he spotted me. Relief. Someone—Todd—didn't think I would show up.

"You look great," he lied.

"You look like you spent an hour in the dryer after it stopped."

"My car wouldn't start."

"Why not?"

"It's on fire. Or it was until the fire department put it out."

Wow. That was really going around. "Maybe someone who hates your stupid guts set it on fire."

The face I used to find cute, but was now as repellant to me as boiled offal, looked worried. “Why would anyone set my car on fire?”

“Jilted lover maybe?”

Guilt flashed across his face. His gaze slid away, sticking to the parked cars behind me. “There was only you.”

Did that make me feel better or worse? Hard to say. “Nice to know I’m the only one you screwed over. Maybe you skipped a manufacturer recall.”

“Never.”

That was Todd. He functioned with robotic efficiency. Like a can opener or a coffeepot.

“I’m ready for that cheesecake. As soon as it’s done I’m leaving, so whatever you want to talk about, make it fast.”

He opened the door for me. The Cheesecake Factory was a better smelling mosh pit. After twenty silent and awkward minutes we scored a table—one of those half booth things where one person is stuck sitting on the chair. I took the booth. Todd didn’t complain. In the old days he’d whine like a puppy with a full bladder if he didn’t get the inside seat. He barely winced as a server bonked his blond head with a tray on the way past. Someone must have spent time in therapy.

“I meant what I said,” he said, giving me zero clues about things that were said.

I dredged through my short-term memory and came up dry. “About what?”

“You look great.” His gaze combed over me appreciatively. “Really great.”

“You said that already.”

“You look so nice I had to say it twice.”

Dude. Just no. “What do you want, Todd?”

“Seeing you again made me remember the past. How we used to be. How we were in sync. The way we liked the same things.”

“Penis. We both liked penis.”

The woman at the next table leaned over. “I like penis, too.”

I threw up my hands. “Everybody loves penis!”

“Penis is like Raymond that way,” the woman said.

Todd looked like he wanted to be the one slithering down under the table this time. Being the center of attention wasn’t his thing unless he was getting an atta boy or a trophy.

Our server showed up with two kinds of bread, butter, and questions about what we wanted to drink. As soon as she left I seized the breadbasket. The brown bread was mine—all mine. Todd could get his own brown bread if he wanted some.

“Kat …”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.”

“Kat …” He reached over the basket and tried to hold my hand, the one with the butter knife in it.

Whoa. Someone was really living dangerously for a change. Clearly Todd didn’t understand that this bread was mine and I wasn’t in a sharing mood. His hand was cool and dry. One of us was a Slytherin and it wasn’t me.

“Let go of the knife,” he said.

“But I want bread and butter, and I want it now.”

“Remember how it used to be?”

“Before the mouth penis? Sure. It was a nice lie. I was under the impression that you loved me and that your favorite animal wasn’t a trouser snake. Boy, you really showed me. Who knew you were an Olympic level kneeler?”

“Can you just stop? I get it. I screwed up. I lost you. But look at us now. We’re both happier. So in a way I did you a favor.”

“Are you happy, Todd? Are you?”

“Mostly.”

I raised an eyebrow in his direction. Clearly he’d brought me here for a reason other than a walk down nightmare lane, so he’d better hurry up and spill it or I’d walk … as soon as I finished this bread, lunch, and a giant wedge of cheesecake. I was thinking the Snickers or maybe white chocolate raspberry.

“For crying out loud, just stop messing around and tell me why I’m here.”

Regrets were definitely on the menu. Why the heck had I agreed to this?

Oh. Yeah. Cheesecake.

Todd fiddled with the napkin. He picked at a slice of white bread, rubbing the crust until it turned to a pile of crumbs. While he was doing that I scoffed down three heavily buttered slabs of the brown.

“I don’t know what to do about Francis,” he said at last.

You know in cartoons when the character shoves a finger into their ear canal to dislodge something stuck in there, blocking the sound waves from beating on the drum? Often it’s a fish or a family of squirrels. Sometimes it’s dirty laundry or snacks. That’s what I almost did because Todd’s words had entered my ear but my brain couldn’t transform them into either of the languages in my databank.

“Excuse me? Could you repeat that?”

He said it again. Same words. Same order. Same fog between my ear and brain. Then, miraculously, it cleared.

“You brought me here so I could give you … *relationship advice*? You can’t be serious.”

“You were so good at our relationship, I figured you could help.”

Christ in a crate. “I was good at it because I loved you and had no idea you preferred penis!”

“I didn’t prefer it, I just like it a lot more than I prefer woman … parts.”

“That is the very definition of preference!”

“Is it?”

How I had ever loved this man was a mystery. “Go on then, what do you want advice about?”

Todd looked relieved. “You met Francis, remember? The other day at Hipster Burger, before it blew up.”

“Short, stocky, looks like his family tree is part Gotti, part Corleone?”

“That’s the one.”

“What about him?”

“I don’t think he’s into me.”

Fillers Todd had injected into his forehead had somehow leaked into his brain. Was he always this boneheaded?

“Congratulations, bub, that’s life. Sometimes people aren’t into you no matter how much you want them to be. You of all people should know that.”

“I get that. But I don’t get him. He’s giving me mixed signals. He’s always hanging around, calling me— His phone whistled. He glanced at the screen then held it up for me to read the text from Francis, asking how lunch was going.

“See what I mean? Why would he care unless he was interested?”

“You do know two men—or any two people in any combination of sex or gender—can be just friends, right? People do that all the time.”

His face fell. “So what should I do?”

Our server returned for our orders. Forget lunch, I just wanted to eat cheesecake and go. For a friend I’d be happy to sit here for hour dissecting relationships and hunting for omens in the entrails of this bread. But for Todd? Forget it. He was poo.

“Ask him on a date.”

“I tried. He mistook it for a friend thing.”

“Have you tried talking to him about your feelings?”

“If I was good at discussing my feelings I would have just told you I like men more than women.”

Ouch, but also good point.

I waved my arm at the server. She bustled over. “Make that cheesecake to-go, please.”

Todd’s face fell. It was doing that a lot. “Can you give me a ride home? Car. Fire. No more car.”

My teeth ground together. This time there was no bread to buffer them. “Fine. But never call me again after this.”

“But—”

“Which part of ‘never’ is giving you problems?”

Outside, Oregon was being Oregon. Rain fell from the sky in thin wet sheets. I told Todd to wait while I brought the Jeep around. Wouldn’t do to get that nice suit wet as well as crumpled and smoky. Todd nodded. I wasn’t surprised. He was always happy to be pampered—by me and by others. Not a gallant bone in his body. Well, maybe someone else’s bone, but never one of his own.

After a long slog through the busy parking lot, I arrived at the Jeep. My blood froze. While I was gnawing on brown bread graffiti had appeared across the driver’s side door. Black spray paint. Four letters. One word.

BOOM.

Chapter 7

I JOGGED BACK TO TODD. “Change of plans, get a cab or an Uber.”

“Something wrong?”

“Probably my car has a bomb in it.”

He looked horrified.

“Relax,” I said. “It’s not the first time. At least this time the bomber was nice enough to leave me a note. They’re not normally so polite.”

“Oh my God.”

“God can’t help me—not unless He knows how to locate and defuse a bomb. Do you think He can do that? Should I ask?”

“What is wrong with you? Why are you so cheerful? Why aren’t you freaking out?”

“Things have really changed. Todd. I’ve been in Greece for the past few months with my family.”

“Wait—you have family in Greece? Since when?”

How could I possibly condense a few months of insanity and crime into a few sentences? Easy. I didn’t even try. “Dad kept his side of the family a secret because they’re the Greek mob. When they’re around, stuff blows up all the time.”

Blood drained out of his face. He glanced around the way a small fuzzy creature does when it senses a bird of prey is imminent.

“About that ride …”

“No can do,” I said. “Unless you’re okay with your body parts spraying all over the parking lot.”

“There’s a thing I have to do,” he said weakly.

“A thing far, far away from here?”

“Yes!”

Like a little chicken-shit—or a sane person—he took off. Huh. Who knew Todd could run so fast?

With Todd gone, the panic set in. In Greece I could call Grandma. Half the cousins seemed to know about locating and disarming incendiary devices. Here I had nobody. Who could I call? I’d effectively cut myself off from the Google of organized crime.

Wait a minute. The note stashed in my bag. The note I’d discovered pinned to the dummy, offering help. Was I crazy? Possibly. Whoever left that note also left it pinned to a fake corpse, so their level of sanity was on par with mine. But I had no one else. I didn’t want to call Greece or Dad and admit that things weren’t going to so great. If I called Grandma she’d send the whole Scooby gang.

Not feeling good about any of this, I dialed the number. A man answered almost immediately.

"Hello?" No-nonsense voice. Calm, capable tone.

"This is Katerina Makris—that's with an s at the end."

"Hello, Katerina. I hoped you would call. How can I help you?"

I have a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"Probably when you left a dummy in my house and a note offering help, you meant something like carpet cleaning or carrying groceries, right?"

"Do you need your carpet cleaned or your groceries carried?"

"My carpet is fine and with the amount of groceries I can afford right now I can carry them in one hand. My problem is way more exotic."

"Hit me with it," he said without freaking out.

"It's just a teensy car bomb—or at least the threat of a car bomb. I can't be sure which. I only recognize car bombs after they exploded. Before they explode they look just like any car part to me."

If he thought I was a babbling idiot he didn't say. He asked where I was and then he said, "I'll take care of your Jeep. Someone will be right there to take you home."

"Who?"

I was talking to dead air.

The mall kept on doing its hectic mall-before-Christmas thing, with its bright lights and tinsel. Nobody looked worried. They kept coming and going, to and from their cars that didn't have bombs or graffiti. Happy people. People who had finished their Christmas shopping. I gnawed on my lip and tried not to look like a woman with a potential bomb in her car, a woman who had just called a complete stranger—or worse—for help.

A cab rolled toward me. Stopped. The window buzzed down. The cab driver stuck his head out. He was maybe fifty, clean-shaven, with a skin tone that suggested that he or his ancestors originally hailed from elsewhere. Somewhere with warm seas and rum.

"Katerina? Are you Katerina?" The accent said he was Oregonian, born and raised.

"Yes, but I didn't call a cab."

"Someone paid me to pick you up and take you anywhere you want to go."

"Who?"

"Just a guess, from what they paid me, I'd say your guardian angel."

Thanks to the whole Trojan Horse debacle, Greeks had issues with forgetting to look gift horses in the mouth. This was a taxicab not a

horse, so I peered through the windows before angling into the backseat.

"This isn't going to blow up, is it?"

"It hasn't yet."

I FRETTED the whole way home. Would my poor Jeep explode all alone amidst a sea of cars in the mall parking lot? Worse—what if someone got hurt? What kind of sicko was getting his kicks vandalizing my things and stopping me from collecting a paycheck? Was this very nice cab driver going to pull over somewhere dark and cut my head off before tossing the rest of me in a ditch?

When he stopped in my driveway I decided my head was safe. I pulled a twenty I couldn't afford to part with out of my purse and offered him the cash.

He waved it away with a big, pale-palmed hand. "Already got paid above and beyond. You have a good night now. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

Which was the merry part? This Christmas was feeling about as merry as a horror novel.

Now seemed like a healthy time for some good old-fashioned paranoia. I scrounged up a bag of chips and sat by the front window while I waited for the disembodied voice from the phone to give me update. From the way the air shifted I could tell my bear was rolling over in her sleep on the couch behind me. Across the street, my neighbor's house was still and quiet, the driveway empty, the garbage cans neatly tucked against the side of the house. If she had a car I'd never seen it. The only transport I'd ever seen her use was feet. I scanned the street. The black van was still there—or back again. If it came and went I hadn't noticed any movement.

The van bothered me. A lot. Things in my life were hinky, and something told me that van was involved.

My neighborhood is quiet on weekdays. Everyone is at work or out doing the things people do when they're not slaves to the paycheck. Lawns get mowed on weekends, and those who tend to yard work during the week hire the job out. No one was mowing today. The street was free of contractors and other potential witnesses. I was still in my workout gear so I trotted out, breathed in the cold, damp air, and set off for the black van with a knife tucked up in my sleeve. If the van's driver was a scumbag, I wanted to get a good look at them from the safety of my house. Flat tires would stop them from zipping away in a cloud of fumes.

I crouched down behind the van, faked an untied shoelace. The

blade went into the vulcanized rubber like butter—frozen butter. Was that enough? I gave it another hearty stab for good measure. With that out of the way, I figured since I was part way around the block it wouldn't hurt to keep on going and get some exercise.

Despite the cold, my frostbite quickly turned to sweat and my good intentions turned to regret.

My phone interrupted the Top 40—again. I was destined to never hear this week's most popular song. The phone number was the one I'd called earlier. My mysterious savior.

"You weren't there," the voice said.

"I thought the cab was you."

"The cab wasn't me. But I have an offer I'd like to extend to you."

"Is it an offer I can't refuse?"

He laughed. "You can refuse all you want, but I hope you accept. It's a job."

The sun peeked out, then vanished again behind Portland's gray curtain. "Things have been blowing up around me lately. The animal shelter wasn't happy about that. You might not be happy about it either."

"I don't rescue and rehome pets, and my employees are used to bomb threats. Your Jeep was clean, by the way. It'll be in your driveway by morning, I'm sure."

"You checked it?"

"No. A third party had the situation under control."

"Third party? What third party?" There were too many third parties in my life, and I wasn't invited to any of them.

"Relax, your Jeep is safe."

Nothing reassures a person less than being told to relax, chill, or calm down. "It won't explode?"

"Not unless you drive it into a gas tanker."

"I need to start keeping it in the garage."

"If someone wants to blow you up a locked garage won't stop them. I'm sending you an address. See you at 10 AM tomorrow morning. No obligation. Hear me out, and if you like what I hear the job is yours."

"Is there a dress code?"

There was a pause. Then: "Just be yourself, Katerina Makris-with-an-s."

BE MYSELF. I could do that. And I could do it in black jeans, boots, and a black sweater. My survival instincts told me Grandma would know if I wore anything lighter than midnight. She might not mind—

Litsa, my cousin's dead wife, was less of a village bicycle and more of a city bus—but Greece's tabloids would adore my blatant disrespect. Their covers would be all me, all the time, until someone else screwed up.

"Be good," I told my pets as I performed rounds and made sure everyone was taken care of until this evening. "Probably I won't be home until late this afternoon, so don't eat anything that isn't food—your food."

I found my Jeep hunkered in the driveway, acting all innocent like it hadn't gone slumming with a vandal. The mysterious third party had taken the time and effort to fully detail my beloved ride—and they'd done it without needing the keys, which should have bothered me but was barely a blip on my weird-o-meter these days. The gas tank was full, and a new sticker on the windshield said the oil was freshly changed.

I backed down the driveway like the Jeep was filled with eggs, through my neighborhood at the speed of snail. When the Jeep didn't explode, I dared to nudge the gas and push the speedometer to ten below the speed limit. The Toyota driver behind me waved at me Greek-style with their middle finger.

Ironically, although I was on my way to the address the disembodied voice on the phone gave me, I had reservations. Was it a smart idea to drive across town to meet a person who propped up a dummy against my Christmas tree, a person who broke into my house? No. Was I about to deny my Greek curiosity by turning around and going home? Also no. Curiosity drove me to an address over in St. John's. The two-story building looked like the supply depot for the guy who sold guns out of his trunk under a nearby bridge. A baker's dozen of vehicles were lined up out front, new and gleaming. The place was a dump but the business inside was some kind of gold mine. Probably organized crime. Which, to be fair, was kind of my wheelhouse these days.

I sat in the Jeep, hands on the steering wheel, not going in. What was I doing here? Even for me and my recent history this was nuts. A sane woman would have filed a restraining order. Me, I'd all but accepted a job I knew nothing about. Around here the odds were overwhelmingly for the job being of the blow or hand variety. I had plenty of experience with both on a strictly amateur, only-in-relationships, and occasionally-on-dates-that-were-going-pretty-well basis.

A finger tapped the window. My head shot up. It took me a moment but I recognized the finger tapper as Francis, Todd's special friend. Today he was dressed like a billionaire mobster from a spicy romance cover, all suit and tie and lightly stubbled chin.

I rolled down the window. Cold air whooshed in.

"You."

He held both hands out, splayed. "Me. Who did you expect?"

"Somebody who isn't you. More shadowy. Someone with henchmen."

He laughed. "You have an active imagination."

No, what I had was an overabundance of henchmen in my life. Everyone I knew these days employed a few.

"What is this?" I asked.

He shoved his hands in his pants pockets and rocked back on his heels. "I meant what I said. This is about a job. I want you to come work with me."

"You want me to work for you?"

"With me. There's a difference."

"Usually working with someone is working for them. The words are just semantics. What's the job?" Whatever he said, probably I'd take it. These were desperate times. "Unless it's a hand job. Ohmygod, this isn't a prostitution gig, is it?"

He shook his head, laughing. "You and your imagination." He reached into his lapel pocket and presented me with an envelope. Very *American Psycho*. "This is what I'm offering as compensation if you agree to work with me."

I opened it up. Read the number. Read it again because the numbers had to be a lie.

"Is this your phone number? I remember it being shorter than that."

"Salary."

"Per decade?"

"Year."

"Will I be doing anything illegal?" Because these kinds of numbers suggested crime was afoot.

"No."

"Shady? Gray? Off-white? Walking a fine line?"

"Nothing illegal or anything like it." He held up both hands. Clearly he wasn't Greek or he'd know better than to show his palms. An open palm was an insult. It meant the person on the receiving end suffered from a brain-softening malady brought on by a chronic self-love habit. "I swear on my life. I know I look like I fell out of a mafia movie and hit every branch on the way down, but I'm one of the good guys."

"You stuck a dummy in my house. Come to think of it, you broke into my house!"

"I needed to get your attention."

"A conversation would have sufficed."

"I figured you wouldn't take a chance on a conversation with a guy who is friends with your ex. Todd told me what he did to you. If I were you I would have hung up on me."

My ex's candor was admirable … and also very Todd-like. The only one he'd never been honest with was me.

"Nobody hangs up anymore. We end calls."

"Good point," he said. "So you ready to hear more?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"I'm down a body and you're the woman who didn't lose her cool when she caught her fiancé cheating."

Bills loomed in my near future. I couldn't keep borrowing from Dad's hidden fund behind the master bathroom's medicine cabinet.

"I'll take it."

"You haven't heard what the job is yet."

"My last real job was in a morgue. Once I saw a Cabbage Patch Kid's head stuck up a man's butt."

His face didn't move for the longest time. Then he said: "At least it wasn't the whole doll."

Small mercy. "When do I start? Today?"

"Tomorrow. Be here 9:00 AM."

"What is the job?"

"Surveillance."

"You want to pay me all this money to watch people?"

"It's boring work. Nobody would do it if I didn't pay them well."

NOT THE WEIRDEST morning of my life, but it was definitely a Top Ten contender. On the bright side I had a new job, so that didn't suck. On the way home I stopped for chips I could barely afford and a bunch of bananas I needed to inject some health food into my life. Whistling, I let myself into the house.

And stopped.

Again.

For crying out loud, why was I trapped in my own bizarre *Groundhog Day* retelling? Not cool, universe. Not cool.

Today there were no dead bodies and no magically appearing decorations, so that was something. Instead, the shower was running and I wasn't in it.

This was a problem, but was it a call-the-cops problem or a plumbing problem? In the space of a few months my relationship with the local police had morphed from distant but amicable to me being in a Person of Interest database.

They were wrong. I wasn't interesting. Would I be carrying chips

and bananas if I led an interesting life?

What to do?

For years I'd believed Dad was an effervescent and often hyperbolic Greek with a tendency to watch the world with a paranoid and cynical eye, who also happened to drive trucks. Then I discovered he was a mobster's son, a high-ranking member of a Greek intelligence agency, and a gun owner. One of those guns—I was sure there were more—was in the master bathroom, secreted away in a safe behind the medicine cabinet. That master bathroom was currently occupied by a showering intruder, so there was no way I could get to the gun and shoot them in the foot for breaking into my house.

Without a gun for backup, I was forced to improvise. I dug out my stun gun, the one shaped like a lipstick. It had the power to make a grown man poop his pants. Very convenient if you're the bad guy who gets stunned in a bathroom.

Back flat against the wall, I crept up the stairs, toward the master bathroom door. My skin vacillated between hot and cold. I tried to talk myself into bravery I didn't feel. An inspirational phrase would be useful right now. My disappointing brain refused to cooperate. It burped up memes and nothing else. *Ehmagerd, buhguhlers.*

I paused to listen.

Someone was definitely in there. The water sounds weren't constant. They changed as a body moved around under the stream.

The shower invader was naked and wet, while I was dry and holding a stun gun. The odds were in my favor. I liked odds that were in my favor. First I'd zap the intruder and then call Francis. My new employer seemed to know things and people. Probably they came standard with the crooked nose on his face.

Slowly, I turned the door handle. The moment it disengaged, I flung the door open and let out a primal roar, brandishing the stun gun. My eyes cut to the most prominent feature in the room.

Penis.

Argh.

Waving the stun gun I leaped backward. I was prepared for a criminal, not his random penis. I jabbed at the air, hoping to find more body to go with the penis.

No body. No penis. Just steam.

"Katerina."

Ohmygod, the penis-haver knew my name.

My eyes cut upward to the penis's life support system. The bronze skin should have been a dead giveaway but my stupid, fear-addled brain couldn't compute the simple math until my gaze traveled over the six-pack of abs, the hard, smooth pectorals, the mile of broad chest and shoulders, and landed on the penis's face.

“Argh!” I yelped, this time not in my head. I snatched up the towel and flung it at him. Instead, it wound up tangled around my head. For a moment I struggled. With an almighty slap I managed to break free. “Argh!”

“I can’t tell if you’re a pirate or you’re surprised to see me,” Xander said.

“I’m not a penis!” In the bathroom mirror, through the veil of steam, I saw my face turn the red of ultimate humiliation. “I mean I’m not a pirate. You’re in my bathroom. Why are you in my bathroom?”

“I was dirty.”

“Well … you look clean now.” My gaze gravitated south again—probably for science. “I can’t stop looking at your … It’s just …”

“Just what?”

“So … so … so *there*. Can’t you cover it up?”

“You’re holding the towel.”

I thrust the towel at him and tried not to stare as he casually, slowly, wrapped the towel around his waist. Disappointment shanked me between the ribs and twisted.

More than once Xander and I had come this close to bonking. I knew the wiener gods had been generous because it’s hard to miss something that big when it’s in the upright position and pressed against you. Seeing it in the flesh was life altering.

Xander is a complicated man. He’s half henchman, half spook (he works for the NIS - Greece’s CIA), favors an all-black wardrobe, which does him all kinds of favors when he doesn’t need any favors at all. His skin is bronze, his body is basically god-like, and he can tie a ponytail without pulling my hair. Someone that big shouldn’t be able to move through life like a panther, but I swear I’ve never heard the man’s footsteps.

“Better?” he asked.

I gulped. From the waist up he was all wet, and from the waist down he was mostly towel. No, not better at all. Just covered. “What are you doing here?”

“Showering.”

“In this country! In Oregon! In Portland! In my house! In my parents’ bathroom!”

“Showering,” he repeated.

“Because your shower back in Greece is broken? That’s a long way to go for a shower.”

A grin spread slowly across his face. Xander didn’t smile much but when he did it was like the sun coming out in summer after a long Portland fall, winter, and spring.

“Yes.”

I wasn’t born yesterday, and I wasn’t born at night—especially not

last night. I wasn't any of the things that meant a person might be casually tootling through life, wool neatly wrapped around their eyes. Something was up. No, not *that*—I looked. Something else.

"Are you going to tell me what is going on?"

"Kyria Katerina sent me."

Grandma. Of course. She couldn't help trying to control my world. "I told her not to send anybody!"

"She is an old woman and she does not hear as well as she used to."

Yeah, right. Grandma could hear a towel drop in another country.

"How did you get in?"

"Key."

I glanced around. "Where is it?" One set of clothes sat on the counter—black. No boots. No wallet. No nothing. "Where are the rest of your things?"

He produced a toothbrush and got busy brushing.

To the rest of the world Xander was silent. He didn't respond to knock-knock jokes or sudden tickling. He spoke to me when it suited him, and right now it didn't suit him.

No problem. Lots of the mouths in my family loved talking. One of Marika's biggest talents was Too Much Information.

I snatched my phone out of my pocket and pressed Marika's number using Facetime. If she lied to me I'd see it all over her face.

She took her time answering. Crumbs tumbled down her chin. She mopped them up with a napkin. "Katerina! What are you doing?"

Wherever she was it wasn't anywhere familiar. To me it looked like she was at a booth in a restaurant.

"Where are you?"

She beamed. "A miracle has happened. Takis took me to a restaurant without me holding a knife to his *poutsa*."

"It was not a knife, it was a nail file," Takis said in the background. "Those things are worse!"

I cheered inside my head. Takis never took Marika anywhere, except the one time they went to Disney World and he bought guns from a dodgy man under a bridge on the way, and once when she tagged along after I flitted back home.

"What restaurant?" My stomach growled. It wanted Greek food and it wanted it now. "Tell me everything. What did you order?"

"A restaurant with a name I cannot remember. One on the waterfront."

"Which waterfront?"

"Volos."

I twirled my finger. "Show me. I want to live vicariously. I've been living on chips, and the only view is my neighbor power walking to

nowhere."

Marika went shifty eyed. "Here comes more food. I have to eat otherwise the baby will make me throw up."

Was she … *lying* to me? Inconceivable. But also very conceivable. Marika thrived on dispensing Too Much Information but it wasn't always True or Accurate Information.

"Show me."

"Show you what?"

"The view and the food. I want to see the water and some Greek food."

"Marika, put down the phone," Takis barked in the background. "*Vre*, I am trying to eat here. What is this? Do they call this *patates tiganites*?"

"*Skasmos*," she bit back. "Eat your food. I am busy trying to avoid a conversation with Katerina right now."

"Wave the phone around," I said.

"I do not want to."

"Live dangerously. Do it anyway. Show me the food."

She sighed. The phone shifted to a tall, sweating glass of water. "There. Now you see the water, yes?"

While she was busy trying to fake me out, my brain was hard at work picking out details of the limited surroundings. My gaze latched onto the tattooed college kid sliding a plate onto the table and the woodwork at the bar. I knew this place and it was nowhere near Greece.

"Wait a minute — is that a McMenamins?"

"What? I do not know what that is."

"It *is* McMenamins! I know it is. Don't lie."

"What is that word? I cannot understand what you are saying. My phone is not working—"

"Stay. Right. There."

I punctuated the sentence like her life depended on it.

Chapter 8

EVERY PORTLANDER KNOWS EVERY MCMENAMINS. Right now Marika and Takis were sitting in a booth at a McMenamins in Beaverton. Normally I didn't gamble with people's lives, but today I'd bet my whole family's good health that Grandma had blatantly defied my wishes and sent family to spy on me.

Grumbling about privacy and betrayal, I snatched up my keys, bag, coat.

Xander appeared at the bottom of the stairs, fully dressed in his usual black. I tried not to think about his penis.

"Going somewhere?" he said.

"On a wascally wabbit hunt."

"Okay, I'm driving."

"No."

"Yes."

"Fine. But only if I can control the music."

He didn't get in a hurry to answer that. Xander has music issues. He has the taste of a man who took a syringe of cement to the ear canal. There's a whole world of great music out there, yet Xander prefers the pained wails of *rembetica*, Greece's folk music, where grown men whine about how they lost their favorite goat to another goatherd, or about how some other guy caught a bigger fish and used that fish to lure his wife into a life of debauchery.

Xander nodded once. Victory was mine—this time.

We went outside. Reggie Tubbs was in his usual spot on the porch, hunkered over a steaming coffee cup. He raised the cup when he spotted us.

"I'd high five you but this coffee is the only thing stopping me from freezing my balls off. I've only got the two so I gotta be careful. Although these days they make implants if you lose one of them along the way. They look like ping pong balls." He snorted. "Maybe they could hook me up with a pair of baseballs."

I backtracked to the innocent time before the ball talk. "High five?"

"The tall drink of water there with you." Reggie raised his voice. "Just so you know, it's not every day she brings a man home, so don't go treating her like a common ho."

Kill me. Kill me now. "This is Xander," I said. "He works for my grandmother."

The retired judge zipped his lips. “Say no more. I won’t mention this to her.” He settled back into his chair and sipped his coffee. The coffee slopped over the edge as he sat bolt upright. “Hey now, that’s the guy from the van. I recognize him now. He and his three amigos put some serious muscle into decorating your place.”

I looked up at Xander. When we were standing this close there was a lot of him to scale before I reached his face. “You put up the decorations?”

He shrugged.

Relief swept over me. Xander was my mysterious interior and exterior decorator, not Francis or some dodgy stranger whose goal was to traumatize me with tinsel and flashing lights. That I could live with.

“Who were the other three guys?” I asked him.

He said nothing.

“Never mind, I can guess.”

While I locked up, Xander crossed the street. He stopped by the black van, crouched down. Uh-oh. On the one hand I felt vindicated. The van’s driver was up to no-good, sort of. On the other hand I’d slashed Xander’s tire and now he had a face like stone—angry stone.

Back he came. “Someone slashed my tire.” He spoke low and facing away from the street so no one would catch him speaking.

“Wow,” I said. “How about that. This neighborhood is really going downhill. When I was a kid the worst crime committed around here was random dog poop on the lawn. Guess we better take my Jeep.”

Xander went to wait by the driver’s side, hand extended.

I rattled the keys at him. “No, no, no. My car.”

With a quick smirk, he went around to the passenger side.

“Forget it, Mister. It’s the backseat for you.”

I had to give the guy credit, he got in and buckled up without complaining. Which was saying something because the Jeep didn’t have an overabundance of legroom in the back, and Xander had a lot of leg to extend.

“Payback?” he asked.

“Worse: this is straight-up revenge.”

His expression devolved until his face resembled a gargoyle perched on a gothic church. “Pop music?”

I beamed into the rearview mirror as I hooked up my phone to the sound system. “Siri, one rickroll please.”

Rick Astley’s *Never Gonna Give You Up* danced out of the speakers, front and back. Xander’s expression shifted from gargoyle to open-heart-surgery-without-anesthetic.

“Could be worse,” I told the rearview mirror. “Could be *rembetika*.”

He snorted. “Where are we going?”

“Like you don’t know.”

If Xander was in my house, and Takis and Marika were currently stuffing their faces at McMenamin's, then chances were they were all in on the same not-so-cunning plot.

He didn't confirm or deny. "How are things?"

"Great!"

His dark gaze tried to hold mine in the mirror. I broke away because I didn't fancy crashing the Jeep.

"I've got a job."

"Really." There was no question in his question. More like a statement of disbelief.

"This is my third since I got back. I'd call myself a wildly successful interviewee, so I've got that going for me."

He said nothing.

"Probably I'd be working at a pet shelter, except they got all funny when I told them my last two jobs ended with fireballs. Did you hear about that?"

He sidestepped the question. "So what's the new job?"

"You don't know? I thought you knew everything."

"Humor me."

"It's a job."

"Doing what?"

"Job stuff," I said, and now Xander knew as much as I knew about my employment situation.

"Job stuff," he repeated.

He didn't ask any more questions after that, which suited me fine. More time to focus on picking out my favorite pop tunes.

"Thanks for the decorations and the tree," I said as a remake of Wham's Last Christmas hit the airwaves. "Are you responsible for the cab ride and the bomb detection squad?"

"Yes."

"You changed the oil and detailed the Jeep."

He didn't deny it.

"Thanks."

McMenamins shares a parking lot with a UPS store, a dry cleaner, and several other storefronts that seemed to feature a rotating cast of occupants. Happy Hour was still several hours away so the parking lot was only a quarter full. In the front row I spotted a gleaming black van identical to Xander's, but without the slashed tires. It was parked next to a black Ford Focus, equally shiny and devoid of life inside. A sure sign that Xander, Takis, and Marika hadn't come alone.

"How many of you are here?" I asked Xander. "Stavros? Elias? Never mind. I'll find out myself."

On that note, I marched into McMenamins, scanning the booths for glitches in my Matrix. Takis' complaining stood out above the other,

more polite chatter. He was still ranting about the fries and how they weren't cooked with olive oil in Marika's kitchen.

"*Skasmos* and enjoy America," I heard Marika say. "Do not ruin this food for me."

"Ruin it, she says. Woman, I am here to work."

"Are you?" I said, sneaking up on them. "Are you here to work? Really? That's why you're here? Where are you working, then? Walmart?"

Marika beamed. She heaved herself out of the booth and launched herself at me, smothering my cheeks in kisses. Not Takis. His face scrunched up like he'd popped a whole box of laxatives and was just now feeling the effects.

"You and your phone," he said to his wife. "I am the man of this family and I say that phone is a problem. From now on, no more 'caw, caw, caw' into the phone."

Marika let me go. She slapped the back of her husband's head and then eased back into the booth just in time for the server to slide a brownie stacked with ice cream in front of her.

"Where is he?" I asked. Arms folded, I leaned against the booth.

Takis face went blank. "Who?"

"Elias."

"In Greece."

I stared at him. Hard. He didn't back down. Takis is pure henchman, despite his linguini figure.

"Here, boss."

I swung around to see Elias behind me, dressed in the black the men in the family copied from Xander because they all wished they were that cool. My former bodyguard started out as an assassin hired to kill me, but he switched teams mid-job and Grandma hired him to protect me. He's not a big man but he can easily melt into the background and hurt bad guys when they need hurting.

"You're not supposed to be here," I said, trying to be mad and failing miserably.

Elias shrugged. "Where you go, I go. Whether you know it or not."

I threw my arms around him and squeezed.

"Do that and he will fart," Takis said.

"None of you are supposed to be here." I poked Marika. "And you —my best friend—you lied to me."

"I wanted to tell you the truth, but Takis made me promise not to tell," Marika said.

"True story," Takis said proudly.

"But it cost him," she said.

Less proud: "Also true."

"Tell me everything," I said.

Takis pointed his finger at his wife. “Tell her nothing.”

I pushed Marika’s brownie sideways across the table. She followed, leaving me enough room to fit in beside her. For funsies, I kicked Takis under the table.

“Talk,” I said. “Why are you here? What are you doing? Where are you staying? How long have you been here?”

“We got an AirBnB instead of a hotel,” Marika said, “and a maid. I think when we get back to Greece I will get a maid.”

“No maid,” Takis said. “What for do you think I give you shopping money?”

“It’s me,” Stavros said, appearing behind Elias. “I am the maid.”

Stavros is one of my myriad cousins and one of Grandma’s favorite henchmen. He’s what gay culture refers to as a bear, and when he’s not breaking kneecaps and cuddling Elias, he’s a domestic god.

“He is an excellent maid,” Marika said. “Almost as good as me.”

Greek conversation swirled around me. I’d forgotten how loud and overwhelming my family could be …and how much I had missed them. “An AirBnB? Where? What neighborhood?” My gaze traveled around the table, pausing on each face. “Is it *my* neighborhood?”

Three sets of eyes went shifty. Not Elias and not Xander. They folded their arms because apparently this was wildly entertaining.

“In a nice neighborhood, very clean, although the sound of the garbage trucks and the street cleaners … *po-po* … who can live like that?” Marika said between spoonfuls of brownie and French vanilla ice cream.

“Where. Are. You. Staying?”

“Could be the house behind Theo Michail’s house,” Marika said.

Theo is Greek for uncle.

“Marika!” Takis barked.

Nobody looked at us. Beaverton is heavily multicultural and brimming with characters living off-center lives. We were nothing more than a few more stitches in a colorful rug.

“You’re *squatting* in the house behind my place?” I said.

“It is an AirBnb,” Marika said.

“I doubt that,” I said. “It’s been empty for a while because the owners want too much for it.”

Bones ground against bones as Marika’s head rose slowly from the brownie, until her laser gaze focused on her husband’s face. “You told me it was an AirBnb. That is what you told me.”

“Did I? Who can remember? I say a lot of things, mostly to drown out the sound of your caw, caw, caw.” His hand opened and closed like a puppet.

“Dead man walking,” I muttered. “What are you all doing here?”

“Baboulas sent us, of course,” Marika said.

“I told her not to,” I said sulkily. “When did you get here?”

“Two days ago,” Marika said. “But—”

“Skasmos, woman,” Takis said.

She ignored him. She did that a lot. “—Elias and Xander have been here for weeks.”

“Well …” I pulled out my purse and dropped several of Dad’s twenties on the table. On payday I’d replace them along with the others I’d borrowed. “You can go home. There’s no reason for you to be here.” Except the vaguely malevolent notes and the sudden overabundance of fire in my life. “I’ve got a house, a new job, and a guard bear.” A guard bear that had, thus far, failed at eating intruders.

“You know what you need?” Marika said. “Food. You do not know what you are saying because you are not eating properly.” She looked at the menfolk. “Sit!” she barked in her mom voice. Everyone quickly scooted over. Xander squeezed in next to me. I definitely didn’t think about his penis. Elias pulled up a chair and planted himself at the open end of the booth’s table.

“I’m not ordering until you tell me why you’re here,” I said, thinking food sounded like a great idea. “If Grandma sent you there had to be a reason.”

Takis wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Of course there is a reason, but do you think she would tell us that reason?”

I snatched my phone out of the bag on my lap. “I’ll ask her myself. She’ll tell me. Okay, maybe she won’t tell me at first, but I’ll make her crazy until she spits out the truth just to shut me up.”

I jabbed Grandma’s name on my Contacts list.

“Come,” she said almost immediately.

“Grandma, it’s me.”

“I know that. The photograph of your face told me. What are you doing?”

“Can you believe it, I’m having dinner with family. Isn’t that surprising?”

“Huh,” she said. “That is lucky. Family is gold.”

“So lucky. By the way, I think you know them. Takis, Stavros, Marika, Xander, Elias … Do those names ring a bell?”

“Bell? What bell?”

Things get lost in translation between Greek and English all the time. This was one of those times. But I never put it past Grandma to misunderstand on purpose. She thrived on others underestimating her. That’s how she maintained her dual lifestyle, Wyatt Earp one day, Don Corleone the next.

“I know you sent them, so don’t deny it.”

“Do you hear me denying anything?”

“Why did you send them here?”

“They wanted a vacation,” she said dryly.

In the background, someone asked Grandma for two thousand dollars.

“Are you shopping?”

“For my kitchen. A few things that I need, eh?”

I know Grandma’s kitchen. There isn’t enough room to swing a dead cat—although what kind of unhygienic sicko swings dead cats in kitchens anyway? Grandma can’t fit two thousand dollars of anything in her kitchen.

Then it hit me: the person asking for money spoke English—American English. They had requested dollars, not the euros Greeks used to replace drachmas.

“Buying them where?” I asked suspiciously.

“A place you do not know.”

“What place?”

“A kitchen place.”

I looked at the others. They were occupied with something on Takis’ phone. That left Marika, who was the most likely to leak when squeezed. “Marika, how did you get here?”

“In a van?”

“I mean, to this country.”

She looked uncertain. “On a plane?”

I raised an eyebrow. “A regular plane?”

“On Baboulas’s plane?”

There were way too many question marks in this conversation. “Did she get off with you? And stay behind? And go shopping?”

“Maybe. It was dark. I do not remember.”

“Think carefully.”

In my ear Grandma said, “Marika does not know her *mouni* from a hole in the wall in the men’s bathroom, so there is no point asking her.”

“We call those glory holes over here,” I told her.

There was chilly silence on the other end of the phone.

“The hole in the wall,” I said. “Not Marika’s lady garden.”

“I went to a lady garden once,” Marika said brightly. “There were only women allowed.”

My eye twitched. “Grandma?”

“Fuck my Virgin Mary with a horn,” Grandma said. “Your aunt is trying to pay this woman but the woman is too busy staring at her.”

“She loves my dress,” Aunt Rita said in the background.

Probably that was true around here. We saw all kinds, even the colorful, fabulous Aunt Ritas of the world who’d started out at someone’s uncle.

“Aunt Rita is here, too?” I closed my eyes. Colors swirled. Dots

dotted. “Did the whole family come?”

“Do not be silly,” Grandma said. “Papou and your father are still in Greece. I left your father in charge, and Papou refused to hand over his eagles to the customs people so I had to send him back.”

The dots dotted harder.

“Why are you all here? I’m fine. I have a house. I have a job.”

I didn’t have friends because I hadn’t told anyone I was home yet. How do you say, “I came home because I murdered my cousin, and by the way my family is the Greek Mafia,” on Facebook? Half my friends would leave a surprised emoji and the other half were technically family so they’d be loving my status all over the place.

“There was a credible threat,” Grandma said.

“And several incredible ones,” my aunt said. “Like the man who wants to kidnap you so he can use you as the model for his own high-end sex doll.”

I said nothing for the longest time. Then: “Were the others better or worse than that?”

“That was the best one,” my aunt said. “The others were more creative, though. There is something very wrong with those people.”

Christ on a cliff. I had to hand it to weirdoes; they really maxed out their life goals. “What was the credible threat?”

“*Vre,* one of your jobs exploded and the other one caught fire,” my last remaining grandparents said. “That is a credible threat against your life, yes?”

“Where are you?”

“The shop with a name that makes no sense. A man’s name,” Grandma said. “Why did they name it after a man when more women do the cooking?”

Williams Sonoma at the Washington Square Mall. Fewer than ten minutes away.

“Stay right there.”

“I cannot do that. Your aunt wants to go to heaven.”

“Sephora,” Aunt Rita said over Grandma’s shoulder. “I told you five times, Mama, it is called Sephora. It is French.”

My eye twitched. I held the ticking nerve still with one finger. “I knew that.”

“You cannot trust the French,” Grandma said. “They eat snails.”

XANDER CAME WITH ME. First I tried escaping out the bathroom window at McMenamins, but it didn’t have window, and the poster on the wall wasn’t covering an escape route. So much for my *Shawshank* moment.

The Washington Square Mall and I had seen too much of each other this holiday season. Avoiding it like ground zero of a zombie breakout was the best course of action during December, and yet this was the second time I'd wound up parking out in the boonies when I wasn't even here to shop.

We found Aunt Rita with one of Sephora's black baskets looped over one arm and Grandma carrying a second basket on the verge of overflowing. Aunt Rita swooped me up in her perfumed embrace and hugged the toothpaste out of me.

"I have missed you so much!" she gushed. She reluctantly let me go when Grandma said, "Let me look at her."

For the next thirty seconds I stood still while Grandma inspected me for bruises and other defects. In a Greek attic somewhere, there's a portrait of Grandma in her prime that grows prettier and perkier each year, while the flesh and blood Grandma battles gravity's callous effects and loses. Probably she used to be my height, but time used her as its own personal concertina and now she's almost a foot shorter. Because she's a widow, her wardrobe is exclusively black, and she wears her steel gray hair trapped in a bun at the back of her head. Next to her, Aunt Rita is a giant. Aunt Rita used to be my uncle until she switched teams. As a woman she's downright fabulous, and today she was fabulous in a slinky black dress that made JLo's famous green Versace dress look demure.

"I feel like a watermelon," I said.

"If you were a watermelon Mama would be cutting you open to take a look," Aunt Rita said.

"Then I'm glad I'm not a watermelon."

Finally, Grandma seemed to come to a decision. "You are too skinny. You should eat. Here." She thrust a container of *koulourakia* at me; they magically appeared from inside her large black handbag. I peeked under the lid. No green flecks. These weren't Grandma's infamous cannabis cookies.

"No pot?"

"That was one time."

"What about hallucinogens?"

"That was one other time," she said.

I grabbed one of the twisty orange-scented cookies and stuck the end in my mouth. A sales associate appeared at my elbow. Every product sold in the store was simultaneously on her face or fingers.

"You can't eat in here," she said.

Aunt Rita held up both baskets. "How about now?"

"Would you like a chair to go with that cookie?" the sales associate asked me.

Despite her change of heart, I pocketed the *koulouraki* for later. I

had respect, damn it. I wasn't one of life's rule breakers. That's why I'd come home: to stop an impending death spiral into utter lawlessness.

"I told you not to come," I said to Grandma.

"Did I listen? No. You do not get to my age by listening to everybody who speaks."

"Ignore her," Aunt Rita said. "I do. Mama was worried that you would spend Christmas alone. We were planning to show up on your doorstep on Christmas morning with gifts. This is the first year I have been able to spoil you. Michail was hiding you away for so long."

My inner child was bummed out that I'd missed decades of presents.

"Where are you staying?" I asked them.

"In an AirBnB," Aunt Rita said carefully—too carefully.

"Would this be the same AirBnb where Marika and the others are staying?" I swung around to look at Xander. "Is that where you're staying?"

He did nothing. He was good at it.

"Xander has been sleeping in your attic for the past month," Grandma said.

"My attic! Are you kidding me? We don't have an attic—we have a crawlspace. And what, you've been coming down to use the bathroom and shower when I'm not around?"

He did nothing some more.

I wagged my finger at him. "No more sleeping in the crawlspace. If you insist on sleeping under my roof I'll make up the spare bedroom." I turned back to Grandma and Aunt Rita. "Talk to me about this alleged AirBnB, because when I asked Marika and Takis about their AirBnB, it turned out they were squatting in the house behind me."

"They are not squatting," Grandma said. "I bought the house behind you."

"You bought the house?" My voice reached paint-stripping levels. "Save yourself some time and just tell me everything."

"There is nothing to tell. I own many properties around the world. Real estate can be a decent side business. I liked that house so I bought it."

"And the one in your street," Aunt Rita said over Grandma's shoulder.

"The one in my street," I muttered, my eye twitching. "Which house?"

"Around the bend in the road so Elias can keep an eye on your place."

The eye twitching didn't stop. I pushed my finger hard against the occipital bone. "How much of Portland did you buy?"

“Two houses, that is all,” Grandma said.

“Are you responsible for all the Christmas decorations and the tree? I know Xander did it but were you the instigator?”

“That was Xander’s idea,” Grandma said. “He overheard you talking to that crude man who lives next door.”

Aunt Rita gathered me up in her perfume-scented arms—all the perfumes and their eye-watering notes. “Christmas is coming, and Christmas is all about family. Shall we go to see Santa Claus? You can tell him what you want and I will get it for you.”

“You know I’m almost thirty, right?”

She released me long enough to slip her arm through mine. “Indulge me. I missed out on your childhood.”

Chapter 9

FROM MID-NOVEMBER, Santa took up residence in a grotto located under the food court between the two escalators. School was in for a couple more days so I wasn't about to die of old age in line. A snack sounded good though. Maybe some Goldfish.

I eyed a toddler sucking a juice box. Grandma and Aunt Rita had temporarily ditched me for Starbucks. They'd be back, but when? Xander and Elias were on bodyguard duty, but at a distance because I didn't want them freaking out parents. One took the entrance while the other took the exit. They scanned the crowd continuously.

The lined moved. My number was up. Now it was me and the man in red. He looked behind me for a child.

"It's just me," I said. "I'm not a creep, just a woman with a complicated and overbearing family."

"Sounds like it's coal for them this year." Santa's eyes twinkled. "Have you been naughty or nice?"

Good question. On the one hand I was a decent human who'd never had so much as an overdue library book. On the other I'd recently shot a man dead. A bad man, yes, but to Santa Claus, dead is dead. I'd be lucky to get coal.

"I'm more of a fence sitter."

If he knew the truth he didn't say. "Balance is a good thing to strive for. Don't tell Mrs. Claus, but I ate twelve of her cookies last week and told her I only ate six," he said, like eating cookies was on par with shooting a criminal cousin. "What do you want for Christmas?"

I thought about when my life had jumped the rails and veered so fast of course that crashing into the mountain was unavoidable.

My eighteenth year.

When Mom died, I climbed into the hand basket and waved my ticket to hell at the conductor. If Mom had survived, I liked to think I would be a normal person with zero murders and a couple of kids.

"Can you manage a time machine?"

"How about a candy cane and an activity book?"

"Sure. I like candy canes."

He swept his hand at two big sacks on the floor. One was filled with striped candy canes and the other with flimsy activity books. "Take one of each on your way out. Merry Christmas!"

A round woman in an elf suit handed me a book and a candy cane

on the way past. I passed both to a cute munchkin shyly watching Santa from a distance, her face wracked with the longing and fear I recalled feeling toward Santa around the same age. She wanted to sit beside him, but he was a weirdo stranger dressed up in a red suit, and therefore capable of any number of shenanigans. “Merry Christmas,” I told the little girl. The mother smiled at me. I smiled back. Candy canes and activity books wouldn’t make up for murder but they made a little kid happy.

With that cheerful thought in mind, I turned in circles, hunting for Grandma and Aunt Rita. From outside Santa’s Grotto I could see them meandering back with their coffee. Grandma was staring into hers like the barista had used the cup as a port-a-potty. Un-oh, someone wasn’t a fan of American coffee. Decades of swilling the sludge that is Greek coffee had massacred her taste buds.

“What kind of sicko are you?”

The accusation came at me from behind. I pivoted to see the tot’s mother with a face like thunder.

“Huh?”

The mama bear raised her phone and snapped a picture of my gawking and confused face.

“What are you doing?” I yelped.

Her face was red and furious. “Putting you on the internet so everybody knows you’re a creep who threatens small children!”

My mouth fell open. Xander stepped in and took the woman’s phone. “Hey!” she said. “You can’t do that!”

In a flash he deleted the picture and handed the phone back to her.

“Too late,” she said smugly. “I already sent it out.

I waved my hands at the two of them. “What the heck is going on? Threats? I gave your daughter candy and a book from Santa. Where I come from—which is here—that’s considered a good deed. It’s not like I asked for pictures of your kid in a swimsuit in return!”

Her face evolved from red to purple. “You threatened her!”

Was she having a bad PCP trip? She looked like a regular mom but who knew what secrets she was hiding under her Oregon Ducks sweatshirt and Hunter rain boots. “What are you talking about?”

“That thing you wrote in the book!”

I stuck out my hand. “Can I look?”

“So you can get rid of the evidence? I don’t think so, sicko.”

“Can you just show me then?”

“I suppose so,” she said grudgingly. She flipped the book open to the first page. Someone had scrawled I’M GONNA KARATE CHOP YOU IN THE PIE HOLE, BITCH in big red letters across Rudolph’s face.

A cold finger trailed down my spine and poked my kidneys.

“Can I take a picture of that since you won’t give it back?”

“Fine. But no sudden moves.”

I snapped a picture.

“Elias,” I said to my bodyguard, “can you get this little girl a new book from Santa? One without threats?”

“You’re not taking this one!” the mom snapped.

“Keep it,” I said. “The new one is for your daughter.”

“Sure, Boss.” Elias darted over to Santa and plucked one from the bag. He jogged over and offered it to the mother after leafing through the pages to make sure it was abuse-free. She slapped him with it and gave it to her daughter.

Elias took the slapping in silence.

“I have to find that elf,” I said to him.

“What elf?” he wanted to know.

“The one who gave me the book.”

We jogged over to Santa’s home away from home, his temporary North Pole. I watched as a passel of almost identical kids went diving into the sacks for their Santa treats.

“There’s no elf,” I said, glancing around. “There was an elf when I was there.” I went to the counter. “What happened to the elf who was with Santa before?”

Someone grabbed my arm. A woman—no, a mom. She was wild-eyed and desperate. “Get to the back of the line.”

The line was Star Wars length—original release.

“But—”

“To the back now or I’ll cut you.” She flashed a weapon at me. A sheet of paper. Ouch. Hardcore.

“I might be wrong, but I think you’re overreacting,” I said.

“Do you have kids?”

I had several animals, including a bear. “Not children … exactly …”

“Then you have no idea. The back now, or I’ll cut you.”

I shuffled to the end of the line. Xander and Elias followed. Both men were tense, alert, watching the crowd for trouble. Women boned Xander with their eyes, but if he noticed their drooling he was oblivious.

Grandma hobbled over. “What are you doing?” Her tone could scrub old engine oil out of concrete.

I gave her the Cliff’s Notes about what happened with the book. “Now I’m waiting my turn. It’s Normandy on D-Day up at the front of the line.”

“Did they have guns, tanks, big ships going *pew pew*? Were there Nazis doing Nazi things?”

“A woman threatened to give me paper cuts.”

Grandma didn’t wait at the end of the line. Oh no, not Grandma.

Fearlessly, she marched up to the counter and installed herself directly in front of the cashier. Dying of a thousand paper cuts wasn't on my agenda for today, so I hung back and watched Grandma interrogate Santa's helpers about the mysterious disappearing elf.

The woman with the deadly paper huffed pointedly several times. When her passive aggressive complaints went ignored she lurched forward and tapped Grandma's shoulder.

I made eye contact with Elias. He was thinking what I was thinking: where was popcorn when we needed a bag with extra butter?

Grandma turned around slowly as though she were the Titanic trying to avoid an iceberg. She wore her best stink-eye, which meant things weren't going to end well for Paper Woman. "What?" she said in her thickly accented English.

"You're cutting in. Go to the back of the line."

"I could die of old age in that line. Do you want me to die? What kind of person wants an old woman to die? Christ will judge you for your sin! Shame!"

Paper Woman shriveled away like celluloid, clutching her weapon.

Most of the time Grandma was just Grandma. But sometimes she scared the bejeezus out of me, and it was easy to see why grown men regularly peed a little in her presence.

Grandma waved me over. Head down, I scurried to the front of the line.

"Ask this grown woman in a Santa Claus hat what you want to know," she barked.

Thirty seconds later I knew what I'd already suspected: the woman in the elf costume didn't work for Santa or the mall. Santa's real helpers had assumed she was an overzealous parent with issues discerning reality from fantasy. Because she'd kept her genitals under wraps, they hadn't called mall security.

"So I know it's a woman," I mused.

Grandma zeroed in on my mumbling with the focus of a terrier. "Who?"

"Some nut has been leaving me messages."

"What messages?"

"The messages I've been getting," I said absentmindedly. My brain was gnawing on the possibilities. Women I'd wronged, that sort of thing. I had rules about touching other women's men: no touchee the man. In public restrooms if another woman needed a tampon I was there, arm outstretched, offering salvation. Wronging women wasn't my thing.

"Messages from who, about what?"

I sighed and showed her my phone, with its photographic evidence

of the Jeep's jagged graffiti and the front door mat defiling. The other notes were at home but I showed her the picture I'd snapped of the vandalized activity book. Grandma swiped from picture to picture. Her face was a slab of cold, rigid marble. After an eternity had swept by, she thrust the phone back at me.

"You want baklava? I make baklava."

WE ALL ROLLED BACK to my place. I drove my Jeep with Xander riding in the backseat. Aunt Rita chauffeured Grandma in a black Mercedes. Elias pulled into the driveway behind me. Takis, Marika, and Stavros showed up last in the van. Everybody piled into the house.

Takis wrinkled his nose. "It smells like *skata* in here."

"There's a bear around," I said.

Grandma didn't waste time getting to the point. "Show me the other notes, then I will make baklava."

The graffiti on my car had been lost during its detailing, and I'd washed the front doormat by hand. The other notes I dumped on the coffee table. In silence Grandma inspected the notes. They vanished into her lowlying cleavage. Now that they were down there I wasn't sure she would ever find them again, at least not without a dumbwaiter.

"Should I make a list of people who hate me?" I asked.

She shrugged. "If it makes you feel better, make your list."

"What are you going to do?"

She took a quick trip around the living room, glancing at family photos. Then she seemed to come to a decision. "Where is the kitchen?"

I pointed. Grandma went.

"Good thing someone is going to cook because I could use a snack," Marika said. I wasn't sure I would recognize Marika without food in her mouth or on its way there.

Grandma reappeared, tying an apron around her waist.

"There is a bear in your kitchen."

"She loves the kitchen," I said.

"Takis, take it away."

"Why me?" he said.

"Because everyone else looks like food and you look like something she *hezos* on in the woods," she said.

BY DINNERTIME the house smelled like Greece. Grandma singlehandedly whipped up pastitsio, moussaka, a mountain of fried potatoes, and bowls of Greek salad. There was bread, too. Homemade. Where it had come from I wasn't sure.

"From the neighbor," Grandma said.

"Reggie Tubbs?"

"No—me." She cracked up at her own joke. I had temporarily forgotten Grandma was the newest member of Mr. Rogers newer, twistier neighborhood.

The house was alive with people. We had music. Someone had gone out to get drinks—ouzo and retsina and wine from Samos. The doorbell rang. Reggie Tubbs was on the other side wearing a fuzzy black bathrobe I hadn't seen before.

"It's my formal bathrobe," he said when I asked. "The robe I wear when I'm visiting folks."

"You wear a robe everywhere?"

"I don't feel comfortable without one."

"Wow, being a judge for so long really did a number on you, huh?"

He pointed two fingers at me. "You're out of order!" Then he cracked up. "Just messing with you." He peered over my shoulder. "Smells like you're having a party over here. How does a kindly and devilishly handsome old man swing an invite to this shindig?"

"It's Greek food. You'd hate it."

He rubbed his hands together. "Hey, I've never been afraid to go Greek."

Aunt Rita appeared in all her glory. She'd swapped her revealing black dress for a cocktail dress cut down to there and black feathers in her hair.

"Who is this?" she asked me in Greek. "He reminds me of Papou—if Papou could walk."

"Reggie Tubbs," I said. "He lives next door."

"Who's this then?" Reggie wanted to know. He checked Aunt Rita out appraisingly and left out a low wolf whistle. "Is that one of those dudes in a dress? I've dated a few of those. What's your name, sugar?"

"This is Aunt Rita," I said. "She's Dad's sister."

Aunt Rita offered him her hand. The old judge lifted it to his lips. "On-shon-tay."

My aunt looked borderline impressed. "His manners are better than Papou's, and he does not smell like *ouro*."

"That's because Papou pees in a bag," I said, "and I'm not sure he always hits the bag."

"What does this man want?"

"Food."

Aunt Rita hauled him in by his robe's lapels. "This is a Greek

home, and nobody goes hungry in a Greek home."

Reggie looked downright impressed. "Do you think she wants to see Reggie Junior?" the old judge wanted to know.

"I think she has one of her own," I said. "And it's probably bigger."

"I figured," he said.

MELAS CALLED while I was standing in a corner, forking moussaka into my face. He looked good. Tired but delicious. Although not as tasty as this moussaka which was officially the Best Thing Ever.

He eyed the food I was shoveling into my mouth. "Is that moussaka?"

I took my sweet time savoring before answering. "It is."

"Where did you get moussaka?"

"Is that Nikos?" Grandma called out from the kitchen. "Bring him here. I want to talk to him"

Greece had ruins younger than Grandma but her hearing remained canine-level sharp.

"You're in Greece?" Melas said. The poor man looked hopeful. Aww.

"Greece came to me."

There was a shrill yelp from the kitchen. I raced in to find Reggie Tubbs doubled over, clutching his dangly bits. Grandma was holding a spatula.

"Dangle that thing in my kitchen …"

"My kitchen," I said.

"…and I will smack it again."

"Papou would do that if he hadn't lost his balls in the war," Aunt Rita said.

"Papou lost his balls?" I asked. I was sure he'd commented on his balls before but I'd blocked it out for my own sanity. There are some things no human needs to know.

"He never had them," Grandma said. There was a wicked glint in her eye. She sensed Reggie lifting his head and she waggled the spatula—my spatula. "One more time and you will learn about eating wood," she said in thickly accented English.

"I like the sound of that," he said.

"It's not a sex thing," I told him. "Eating wood is a spanking."

"Takes all kinds," he said. "I love this woman. Could have used her in the courtroom."

"Grandma's got a boyfriend," I said in a singsong voice.

"Katerina has got poison in her *koulourakia*," Grandma sang back.

"Again?" I appealed to the cop on the phone. "See what I have to

live with?"

Melas grinned. "I should have known Greece would follow you."

"Nikos," Grandma said. "Talk to me. What is going on in Greece?"

I swiveled the screen so he could see her. "Turkey invaded and now we are under Ottoman rule again," he said.

Grandma wagged her finger at him. She liked Melas, so he didn't get the threatening spatula. "Tell me everything."

"You mean you don't know?" I said. She shot me a dark look.

"Katerina, eat your food, eh? She is too skinny, Nikos. This is what happens when she comes back here and eats chips for dinner."

"She looks perfect to me," he said. "She always does."

My gaze flicked over to Xander, who was standing by the living room windows, focused on the street. He'd been in that position since we'd arrived home from the mall. No plate in his hand. No wine, beer, or water. While Grandma was grilling Melas about Greece, I fixed Xander a plate, poured him a glass of water, and carried both to the window, where I set everything down on a nearby occasional table. Mom wouldn't mind. She was dead anyway.

Xander's gaze connected with mine. He smiled. Not big but definitely personal. I glanced away to avoid my feelings, which were mostly about his penis.

"Did you move your stuff to the spare room?"

He waggled his head for *yes* as he picked up the plate.

"Anything exciting going on outside?"

His chin tilted up then down for *no*.

Cable news blared in the background. Unbeknownst to the anchors, Takis and Starvros were arguing with them. Elias was at the sliding door with the same watchful eye as Xander. Unlike Xander, he'd grabbed some food. Marika was in the kitchen, reloading her plate.

Reggie didn't seem to care that half the conversation was Greek and other half was pigeon English. He argued right alongside Takis and Stavros. Despite the loudness of my family and the absence of boundaries, Mom and Dad's house felt like a home. The only thing missing was them.

"I gotta take a leak," Reggie said. "Anyone want to hold it for me?" He waited. "No takers? Guess I'll have to do it myself."

He shuffled upstairs with his robe clutched tight.

Takis' head swiveled around until he was looking right at me. "Do you want to tell him?"

"He'll find out," I said.

Takis counted to twenty.

Sure enough, Reggie yelped. He poked his head down the stairs. "You got a number for the dog catcher? Because you've got yourself

one helluva big dog up here!"

I jogged upstairs. My bear was stretched out on my bed with her head under my pillow. "Poor thing, all she wants to do is hibernate and people keep screaming at her."

"Take her to the zoo. They know what to do with a bear."

"But she's my guard bear," I said.

"That guard bear of yours let all kinds of people into your house. You want security, you should think about a flock of geese."

"Geese hate me."

"Geese hate everybody. That's the whole point of geese."

DOWNSTAIRS, Xander was in panther mode, sneaking out the front door. He stopped when he saw me trotting down the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

He showed me his phone. Grandma had given him a shopping list.

I grabbed my coat. "I'm coming with you."

He did nothing at first, then he nodded.

Across the street, my new neighbor was marching round the block. With her head down she power walked up the driveway and let herself into her house.

Xander watched her for a moment, then he inclined his head at the black van around the corner. Like a pair of chickens, we crossed the road.

He stopped.

"Oops," I said. "I guess the Tire Fairy didn't magically fix your tires while we were out."

He sighed. We went back to the Jeep.

Again, I took the wheel. But since I was feeling benevolent, and because I wanted answers, I let Xander ride shotgun.

I started backing down the driveway. The front door flew open. Marika galloped out, clutching her big bag. Normally her handbag held an assortment of guns and snacks. Today I hoped she was only toting snacks. I was pretty confident she didn't have a license to conceal anything stronger than chocolate.

"This looks like an adventure," she said as she climbed into the back. The Jeep lurched sideways. "I like adventures."

"We're just going to the supermarket."

"That sounds like an adventure to me."

So much for getting Xander to talk.

I couldn't help noticing Elias slip out of the house and into his nimble Ford. Stavros tagged along, too. Grandma had brought the big guns, possibly literally. No way had she come just for Christmas. Did

she know about the notes I'd been receiving before our rendezvous in the mall? Probably not. Her surprise over the notes had been genuine. So why was she here?

I drove to Fred Meyer, the closest store that would have everything on Grandma's list. I went to grab a shopping cart. Xander nudged me out of the way and took over.

"Control freak."

He said nothing but the twinkle in his eye said he was totally a control freak about things with wheels. Fine. Let him have his petty victory. At least the cart didn't come with a sound system.

In no time at all we gathered the groceries. Xander steered the shopping cart toward the checkout. Marika fiddled with her phone.

"Not yet," she said. "I want to look for toys for the boys."

Say what? Her passel of boys swung from trees and staged mock battles against other monkey tribes. The world and all its weapons were their toys.

"Your kids play with toys? I figured you just let them loose in the armory and prayed they'd come home with the same number of limbs and organs."

The family compound came with an armory—an armory Grandma kept off limits to me. I was starting to think she didn't trust me with a gun, which was probably smart given that I'd shot some people, including her great-nephew.

"That is exactly what I do, but I was thinking toys for the baby. There is still hope for her. My boys … *po-po*, they are their father, but with my *kolos*."

That was a good thing. Takis' butt was so flat walls all over Europe were envious.

We made a beeline for the toy department, which was clogged with desperate, clammy parents feverishly gawping at the few remaining toys on the shelves. Santa Claus was coming to town and Amazon was almost all out of delivery days, so this was their last resort. Marika squeezed past sweating parents. She went up aisles. She went down aisles. Glares pinged off her without penetrating. Greece did things to women. It made them capable of surviving anything, even the toy department before Christmas.

Xander, Elias, Stavros, and I waited for her off to the side. It was safer amongst the furniture.

"Now I want to look at dresses," she said when she was done and the rest of us were close to desiccating.

We looked at dresses. All the dresses. Followed by all the underwear, cosmetics, and pet toys.

"You don't have a pet," I pointed out.

"Not yet. What if my daughter wants one, eh? I need to be

prepared. What do you think of this?" She held up a large Kong. "I could stuff Takis' *tiganites* inside and keep him busy all day."

"Can we go now?"

She checked her phone again. "Is there somewhere nearby that sells priceless art? How about a museum?"

I looked at her. "Museums don't really sell art. If you're good enough at theft you could say they practically give it away though."

"We could do that. It would be an adventure. Or we could get a pedicure. I have always wanted to get a pedicure."

"I hate pedicures. Too ticklish."

"I would like a pedicure," Stavros said.

Marika beamed. "Then Stavros and I will get pedicures."

"Great. You can ride home with him and Elias later," I said. "Xander can come with me."

"No, no, we need you." Marika waved her hands. "What if we order the wrong thing?"

"They might wax my *kolos*," Stavros said. "I do not want my *kolos* waxed. I have a lot of hair."

We all made the same face. Stavros did have a lot of hair. Someone in the family tree had performed unspeakable acts with a Sasquatch.

An inkling had started to form in my head. My inkling didn't waste time calculating basic math. My inkling leaped directly to warp speed. Someone—and by someone I meant Marika—was trying to prevent me from running home. Why would she do that?

Grandma.

What was my only living grandparent up to?

I folded my arms. Hard. So Marika would know I meant business. "What's going on?"

She pouted. Her pout was fake and dramatic enough to have its own reality TV show. "We are trying to get pedicures and you will not help us."

"We thought you loved us," Stavros said.

Liars, the pair of them. "That's not what I meant. You're trying to keep me away from the house. Why?"

"What? No. You are imagining things." Marika pulled her foot out of its black shoe. "Look at this. It needs rubbing and lotion and those metal files that do that thing so that the skin from my feet looks like a pile of Italian cheese."

"Parmigianino-Reggiano," Stavros said.

"You *do* look like you need a pedicure," I admitted. "Wait a minute, you're still trying to distract me. I know you're up to something."

Marika went all shifty eyed. She sucked at keeping secrets.

Time to apply a little pressure.

“You know you want to tell me,” I said in a singsong voice.

“I do …”

“Just do it, Marika. Do it, like Nike says.”

“I cannot …”

“Grandma won’t kill you.”

“She might kill me.”

“Not until after the baby is born.” I considered the possibilities. They potential outcomes had changed since I discovered Grandma wasn’t all the way evil. “It’s not a surprise party, is it? I hate surprise parties.”

“Maybe it is a surprise party,” Marika said.

“Grandma doesn’t strike me as the surprise party type.” I hauled my phone out of my bag and dialed someone who would tell me the truth, someone who wasn’t, as far as I knew, on American soil. Although for all I knew he’d tried to smuggle himself into the country in a box filled with Greek dirt.

Chapter 10

I called Papou.

"You," he wheezed. "What is wrong with your people? They would not let me bring my eagles into America. This from a country that uses the eagle as its symbol. Do you know what America's symbol should be?"

I wandered toward the store's exit. "Something that isn't an eagle?"

"My *kolos*. Who would not want my eagles? Just the other day a woman came here to ask me if she could buy them. How do you like that, eh?"

"A real woman or an imaginary one?"

"Bah! I am old but I still know a woman when I see one. She was big, yes, but she had pointy *vizia* like a pair of rockets under her shirt. What do you want, eh?"

"Why is everyone here, and why are they trying to keep me away from my house?"

He cackled. Wheezed. Coughed up a lung. Farted. Cackled some more.

"Even for a stupid person you are stupid. Think. Why would you keep someone away from their house?"

"So they can organize a surprise party?"

"Party? What party? There is no party. If you are keeping someone from their home it is so you can put something in or take something out."

"I don't have anything for them to take unless it's the garbage, and what would they put in? Xander has been living in my roof for the past month and he already put up my Christmas tree for me."

"Christmas trees … what a world we live in. In my day we burned old shoes to keep demons away. We ate Christ's bread. We kept a bowl with a wire across the middle, and tied to it was basil on a cross. If we were good we got roasted chestnuts."

"What about presents?"

"No presents. What we got was no beating that day. Did you get any smarter yet? And they say you are like your grandmother. *Po-po* ... the only thing you have in common is *vizia*."

Now that stung. "Mine are still on my chest!"

"For now." That dire warning triggered a fresh round of cackling.

An alarm went off in my head, annoying and reminiscent of my

middle school dismissal bell. I did have things for Grandma to find—no, singular: thing. The tape I'd pilfered from my cousin Viktor Sokolov's tape deck. It was in a super secret hiding place, in the house with nooks and private crannies I had known my whole life. But Grandma was a master.

I took the call outside.

"The tape," I said. "She's looking for the cassette tape, isn't she?"

"What cassette tape?"

There was a pause, the long pregnant kind. The kind that gave me enough time to realize I'd potentially shoved my foot down my throat, dug my own grave, and screwed several pooches.

Papou started to laugh. "I know what you did," he sang. "Maybe you are smarter than you look."

"So are you saying Grandma isn't tearing my house apart right now, hunting for the tape?"

"Why are you asking me? Nobody tells me anything. They sit me in the corner like a potted plant and make fun of my eagles."

Ha. This from a man who was Grandma's *symvoulos*—her consigliore. What he didn't know about Grandma's business could fit on the head of something smaller than a pin. Although he played the idiot, Papou knew all.

"If you tell Grandma I have the tape—the tape that probably isn't even *the* tape—I'll know you told her. My revenge will be slow moving and toothless because I'm terrible at revenge. I suck so hard at revenge that I didn't kick my ex fiancé in the balls when he asked me for relationship advice this week."

"You are the worst," he said.

"I know."

"And you are boring so I am hanging up now."

The call ended before I could tell him no one hangs up anymore.

I hoofed it to the Jeep, where no one was waiting because I hadn't bothered to let them know I was leaving. I whistled as I pulled out of the parking lot. Not a melodic whistle, more like the sharp squeal a cat makes if you step on its tail. Grandma was searching my house right now, I'd put good money on it—if I had any. While I was waiting on this butthead in front of me to turn left, my paternal grandmother was rifling through my things, hunting for the cassette tape I'd pilfered from Viktor's boombox. Grandma being Grandma, she'd no doubt enlisted Takis and Aunt Rita to help. Probably they were knocking walls down, tearing up planks at this very moment.

The phone rang.

"Did you forget something?" Marika asked.

"Like what?"

"Your bodyguards."

“I thought you were just my friend now.”

“I am more like the bodyguard supervisor.”

“What happened to spying?”

“Spies work for someone else. I think I would prefer to be my own boss. I am better at giving orders than taking them.”

I couldn’t see the others, but I knew they were crossing themselves at the idea of Marika supervising anything, let alone henchmen with guns.

“I’m in a hurry. I’ll meet you back at the house.”

“We are right with you,” she said.

Sure enough, Elias’s zippy compact cut into the lane behind me. I glanced in the mirror. Everyone waved, except Xander. Waving wasn’t really his thing.

“Do me a favor,” I said.

“Anything,” Marika said.

“Don’t tell Grandma I’m on my way back.”

“I already called her,” Stavros said in a guilty voice. “What? Nobody told me I was not supposed to.”

GRANDMA WAS in the kitchen making *milopita*, Greece’s version of apple pie. “Katerina,” she said, as innocent as that pie. “Did you get my groceries?”

“You know we did.”

She pulled off her apron and threw it over one shoulder. “The pie is for you for a little snack. Eat a piece before bed. Right now I am going home.”

“Greece?”

“The house around the corner. It has been a long day and I am not as young as I was yesterday.”

I held up my finger. “Don’t go anywhere yet.”

I did a quick circuit of the house. If Grandma had spent the evening hunting out nooks and crannies, it didn’t show. Everything appeared to be untouched, including the cassette tape’s hiding place. What was Grandma up to?

“What is the problem?” she said when I returned. “You look here, you look there, you come back with nothing like a crazy person.”

“What did you do?”

“About what?”

“While I was out, what did you do to my house? I know you did something.”

Her face didn’t move. “What you are talking about? I know nothing. I come here, I cook, I leave again.”

Maybe that was true, maybe it wasn't. My money was on the second one, but the thing about Grandma was that you never really knew. She was full of secrets and surprises, not just recipes. I stared at her like the lines on her face were guts and I was trying to read my fortune. The lines didn't tell me much except that I should double my sunscreen and hit the anti aging lotion now if I wanted to avoid looking like battered luggage in my molden years.

"My marbles," I murmured.

"What marbles?"

Did she know about the cassette? Didn't she? Grandma's face was as unreadable as the Voynich manuscript. She pulled a spectacular innocent-little-old-lady routine when it suited her.

"Never mind," I said.

She kissed me on both cheeks. Aunt Rita did the same, but with bone crushing hugs and clashing perfumes.

"I will see you in tomorrow, and stay off the roof. You will catch cold," Grandma said.

"You know about the roof?"

"I see everything."

"You mean Xander saw everything because he's been living in my crawlspace."

Grandma touched a finger to her falcon-sharp eye. "That is the same thing, yes?"

AT LAST, the house was quiet. Marika and the menfolk had flocked back to the house behind me. Elias went with Grandma and Aunt Rita. From the front window he had a perfectly clear view of the house. Xander was tucked away in the spare bedroom, but his presence sent ripples through the house. I wanted to knock on the door to see if he wanted anything, like maybe another shower.

But no, I was part chicken.

Instead of showering with a hot man I curled up on the couch with Netflix on mute and moseyed on over to the Crooked Noses to see what was happening in the world of organized crime. Did they know Grandma was in town?

That was a firm no. Not even a whisper.

Nobody knows, BangBang wrote.

Knows what?

That Katerina Makri is currently in the United States, visiting her one and only granddaughter.

Wait—how do you know?

It's my job to know.

I figured it would be all over the board by now.

No. I made sure it wasn't.

Why?

Didn't want to put you in more danger than you're already in. You're not the only one with a keen interest in the Makris family and its movements.

I'm in danger?

You're always in danger. Have been since before you were born. Goes with the lineage.

That was cheery. *So who else is keeping track of the family's movements?*

Government or civilian?

Yikes. *Let's go with civilian.*

Seeing as how Grandma was the government.

In the Makris family or outside? BangBang asked.

People in the family read these boards? Do you know who?

Including your grandmother or not including your grandmother?

So it was like that. I should have known one of Grandma's fingers would be in the message board pie. She had a lot of fingers and the world was filled with pie.

My stomach growled. Phone in hand, I wandered in to the kitchen to hunt for leftovers. Grandma's *milopita* was sitting on the counter under a glass dome. I cut a big slice and plopped it on a plate.

Xander was upstairs without pie. No man should have to be upstairs alone without pie. Feeling benevolent, I cut a second slice and filled a glass with milk. I carried both upstairs and knocked on the spare bedroom's door with my foot.

No answer. Was he asleep? Even Xander had to sleep sometime, although the man often seemed like he was a machine with few needs except regular showers and terrible music.

Could be he was doing his silent act.

"It's just me," I said through the door. "I'm alone."

"Come," he said from inside the spare room.

My foot could knock but it was lousy at operating doorknobs. Unlike Daniel Day Lewis, my left foot lacked any real talent. "My hands are kind of full."

The door opened. Xander's hair was rumpled and his face hadn't seen a razor since this morning. He was a man who needed to see a razor regularly or he risked being smothered by a face hedge. He looked tired but he looked good.

"You always bring me things, so this time I'm bringing pie."

He eyed the glass. "With milk?"

"It's the American way."

"Greek pie and American milk?"

My gaze skittered around him to check out the spare room. He'd barely made a blip in his surroundings. There was a military duffel by the closet and he'd unpacked a laptop, which was currently open on the desk. I tried to sneak a peek at the open tabs but my Steve Austin eyeballs hadn't arrived in the mail yet. Not snooping. More like … curious. Was Xander one of the people tapped in to the Crooked Noses at Grandma's behest? That wouldn't surprise me.

"I'm half and half and I turned out okay," I said.

His mouth said nothing but the light in his eyes said he agreed, even though I'd almost zapped him in the shower.

"Do you want to share?" he asked.

I did. I really did. But I wasn't done grilling BangBang, who was waiting patiently for a reply.

"Maybe later."

"I'll be here."

Downstairs, I forked pie into my mouth and messaged BangBang.

Let's start with family members who aren't Grandma.

Your aunt, your father …

Dad was a Crooked Nose? The Dad I knew had issues with the internet. In his day—he told me every time he saw me researching online—he had to consult an oracle if he wanted to know anything. If the oracle didn't know, he had to ask his elders. Books were a last resort, for fancy people with things like money and ambition—never mind that his family owned a serious chunk of the world's money. He thought Google was a cat coughing up a hairball.

I get it, I wrote. *The whole family stalks the board.*

Not the whole family. BangBang made a smiley face.

What about Xander?

He's not your family.

He was right-ish. Xander wasn't blood but we were still connected.

What do you know about Xander? I asked him.

Depends. What kind of information are you looking for?

I don't know.

True story. Xander was a mystery I wanted to solve but at the same time what if the mystery was the allure? I already knew some of his secrets—he was a government agent, and his birth father was Baby Dimitri, one of Greece's other most infamous mobsters and salesman of shoes and souvenirs. None of that dampened my attraction. I wasn't that shallow. But I worried anyway because humans are just bonobos with anxiety and birth control.

The pie on my plate vanished. Ditto the milk. I felt stuffed and empty at the same time, so I sawed off more pie and ate that, too. My eyes cut to an anomaly behind the pie dish. Grandma's phone. She'd forgotten to grab it after all the cooking and cleaning.

I picked it up. The screen came on. Grandma's lock screen was Zeus leaning against a cow. Grandma had issues. I really hoped those issues weren't genetic.

Probably I should return the phone to her right now.

Of course it wouldn't hurt to take a sneaky peek, right?

I hit the Home button.

Locked.

Duh. Grandma wasn't the kind of person who left her phone unlocked. Trust no one, not even granddaughters—probably especially granddaughters. She was practically Fox Mulder, and she knew a lot of cigarette-smoking men.

I grabbed my coat, two phones, my keys, and trotted up the street to Grandma's house, a two-story craftsman painted beige and white. I never saw a For Sale sign. How much had she paid the neighbors to sell their house and vanish in a weekend?

The house was dark. I stood on the front lawn and waved at the windows.

Nothing.

With cupped hands I peered through the window. Too bad the house had curtains; I couldn't see a thing. I let myself into the backyard. A light was on upstairs in one of the bedrooms. I knew it was a bedroom because I found a ladder in the shed and used it for its intended purpose. Grandma was propped up in bed reading a novel. She licked her finger and flipped a page. I tapped with my forehead. My faith in ladders was skimpy.

"Come in, Katerina."

"Window," I said, pointing out the obvious obstacle.

"Unlocked."

Oh. So it was. I shimmed through the window, landing on the carpeted floor. Plush carpet. New.

"Nice carpet," I said.

"I am going to rip it all out and put marble, like civilized people."

"Here in Portland civilized people use something eco friendly like bamboo flooring."

"Bamboo? Do I look like a panda?"

Normally I might have said yes. Tonight I was more worried about security. No one had stopped me from entering the yard. When I mentioned it to Grandma she flipped another page.

"If you were not family you would have no head right now."

"Sniper on the roof?"

She held up two fingers.

Because Grandma couldn't travel like a normal person: without muscle and guns.

"Good thing I'm family."

“What do you want, Katerina? I am reading a book.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. Not at first. I needed a moment to process what I was looking at beyond Grandma’s book. My brain blipped. Grandma had abandoned her omnipresent black and was wearing a nightgown that was positively pink. With a single wardrobe change she’d managed to violate one of Greece’s biggest social rules: No colors for widows—ever. Only black. Until death. Anything brighter and you’re a garbage human crapping on your dead husband for everyone to see.

“That’s pink!” I said, outraged, curious, and impressed.

“You know your colors, very good. What else did they teach you in kindergarten this year?”

“That’s pink! You’re wearing pink!”

She shrugged against the pillows propping her up. “It is my favorite color—so?”

“But you’re in mourning!”

“If you keep saying things I already know then we will be here all night, and I want to finish my book.”

The book. Yes, the book. Reading was something else I’d never seen Grandma do. “What is that? Horror? True crime? Is it about you?”

She rolled her eyes so hard and high that there was no doubt we were blood. “A book. Have you never seen a book before? What do they teach in American schools?”

I squinted. “Wait a minute, is that … a romance novel?”

“No.”

“No, no, no, it *is* a romance novel!” I gawked at the title. *The Greek Billionaire Bodyguard’s Secret Baby’s Secret Island Fortune*. Aww … Grandma loved romance novels. Maybe she was here on vacation after all.

Wrong. This was Grandma. She didn’t do casual vacations, no matter what the suitcase in the corner said. Speaking of suitcases … I nudged hers with my toe. The lid flipped up, revealing stacks of *Arlekin*—Greece’s Harlequin—novels.

“Tell nobody,” she said in a tone that paired well with a little light murder.

A grin spilled across my face. “Maybe I will, maybe I won’t. This is perfect blackmail material.”

“You are terrible, just like me.”

I nudged the suitcase shut. “Why are you really here?”

“To spend Christmas with my only granddaughter. Can you think of a better reason?”

I set her phone on the bedside table. “No. But you’re not a normal grandmother.”

“You asked me a question, now I get to ask you a question.”

“Hit me with it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Eh?”

“It means go ahead and ask your question.”

“Then why did you not say that in the first place, eh? Why are you here?”

“I brought your phone back.”

“In America.”

Oh. That. Guess who didn’t want to have this conversation? Me. I didn’t want to answer the question or any of the follow-up questions that were bound to happen. Unfortunately, Grandma wasn’t one of those people who could be placated with flip humor. Back in the day, and maybe still, she’d employed Kyria Mela, who glared until people bubbled sweat, tears, and snot.

“I killed a man.”

“So what? I have killed men. Lots of men. And some women, too. You do not see me hiding in America.”

Now probably wasn’t a good time to mention the pink, the romance novel, and her presence in the United States.

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t run away from my murder scenes?”

She flipped the page. “Good that you understand. That way I do not have to waste reading time explaining it to you. Now go home. I want to see what happens.”

“They live happily ever after. They always do.”

“Nobody lives happily ever after.”

“I plan to. That’s why I came back to Portland.”

Grandma raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“My Happily Ever After is still under construction.”

Chapter 11

IT WAS a Mexican standoff without Mexicans. Standing in for Mexicans were two Greeks. The Greeks were armed and I had mounting bills, which made them woefully underpowered.

"This isn't Greece. You can't come to work with me with your guns and your glares."

"I never glare, boss," Elias said.

"Smile."

He glared.

"See?"

"That was my best smile."

"Then you're definitely not coming."

"Fire," Elias said. "Explosions. Strangers leaving notes with awful words on them."

He had a point. I had a bigger point.

"Forget it. I need money to survive, and to get money I need to work. I've already lost two jobs to random acts of fire. I'm not losing the next one because of bodyguards with surly dispositions."

"One bodyguard. Xander is just tagging along because he wants to be me when he grows up," Elias said, winking at me.

Xander presented him with a full, five-fingered *moutsa*. Elias flung one back at him. Both men laughed because nobody ever fully grows up.

"Probably the fires were random," I said, not believing any of those words in that particular combination. Since was my new job on the line, so I could live with my own fib.

"Then we are coming with you so it does not happen again," Elias said.

I stared at him. He stared back. Xander stared, too. I tried making my stare harder and meaner but ultimately it was two against one.

"Fine." I sighed like they were destroying my whole world. "But stay in the parking lot. You can't come in."

They followed me across town to the building loitering in St. Johns. From the outside it looked guilty, like it had something to hide. Serial killers, maybe. Or counterfeiters. I'd met both in Europe so this was my jam.

"I do not like the look of this place," Elias said. "Stay with Xander and I will check it out."

My index finger shot up in the warning position. "No—no checking

it out. Sit. Stay."

Truthfully I would have felt better if he'd checked it out first, but now wasn't the time to show weakness, otherwise they'd treat me like fine china from hereon out. I wasn't china. I was more like rubber.

I'd dressed business casual for the first day on the job. Black pants, black button down shirt, black low-heeled boots I'd scored from Baby Dimitri. I'd trapped my hair in a bun so it wouldn't sneak out and cause havoc. Portland's damp winters made my hair spring out like wild pubes, even with central heating doing its best to suck the air dry. With confidence I didn't feel, I strode up to the peeling door and yanked the handle.

Nothing happened.

I checked my phone. I was on time. Francis hadn't fired me by text. Recalling my childhood fire safety lessons, I pressed my hand to the door. No heat. No fire. That made a nice change.

A low whirring above my head jerked my attention upward to a one-eyed security camera.

"Name?" a disembodied voice asked.

"Katerina Makris. With an S."

"It doesn't sound like there's an S."

"It's silent, like the B in lamb."

"I liked that movie."

"Movie?"

"*Silence of the Lambs*. I went to a Halloween party as Buffalo Bill once. Nobody guessed who I was, can you believe it? It's like people don't enjoy good movies anymore. It's all *Thor* this and *Star Wars* that."

An image of this guy I'd never met clad in a suit of women's skin flashed through my head. "Can I come in?" And did I want to?

There was a pause, followed by a click. The door swung open.

Without glancing at my backup waiting in the car, I stepped inside. My mouth fell open. You'd think by my age I'd know not to judge buildings by their slummy outsides. The exterior was a dump one step up from Grandma's inherited hovel. Inside was money. Polished wood floors. Bright lighting. Art on the corridor's walls. Indoor plant tended to by someone with a green thumb. The place smelled like coffee—in a good way. No front desk, no receptionist to ask for directions. Only this boulder with eyes and a t-shirt that said he was security.

"You carrying a gun?"

This was the guy who wasn't a fan of movie franchises.

"No."

"We'll see about that." He waved me to a rubber pad on the ground. "Stand there."

I stood still while he waved a wand over me. Xander had waved a

similar doodad over my Ferrari weeks ago when he was checking for bombs.

"If you're a fairy godmother you're doing it wrong," I said.

He didn't laugh.

Someone else did though. I turned around to see Francis sauntering down the hall in one of his snazzy suits, looking like he was on his way to swindle a widow out of her life savings. He'd taken a detour via the 1980s to grab a black t-shirt to wear instead of a button-down.

"Standard operating procedure. She's good," he told the security meathead. He tilted his head toward the corridor's other end. "Come on. Let's get you to work."

"I still don't know what the work is."

"Just some garden variety surveillance."

"So I do … what?"

"Watch a camera feed."

"Do I get an office?"

"You get a cubicle. That's kind of like an office, except smaller."

"A cubicle isn't remotely like an office."

"There's a desk and a computer and a comfortable chair. Plus you can put up posters if you're into that sort of thing."

"I guess that's kind of like an office."

"See?"

All the time we'd been talking he'd been steering me toward a wide-open space filled with cubicles and other office-y things. The place was sparsely decorated with warm bodies, all of them fixated on their tasks. Whatever was going on here, nobody was messing around.

"There's a kitchen over there with everything you'll ever need."

"Chips and Netflix?"

He grinned. "Yes. Sometimes when work gets hectic, employees will spend the night. The other floors are mostly bedrooms."

"Mostly?"

"Bathrooms, recreation room, and a full-size kitchen."

"So what do you do here?"

"We watch. And speaking of watching, this is where you'll be."

My cubicle was a cubicle. Square. Semi-private. It came with the promised chair and a shiny new computer. There was a coffee mug with my name on it. "So … are you going to bury me in paperwork, tell me about benefits, and all that legal mumbo jumbo?"

"I know who you are and I know where you live."

Yikes. That sounded ominous. Or it would have if I hadn't heard it from bigger, scarier people.

He grinned. Oh. It was one of those joke things. It's hard to tell with people who resemble bit players in Scorsese movies.

"I know your name—well, your first name," I said. "Or is Francis

your last name? I still don't know. Anyway, as soon as I've got a first name and a last name Google will spit out your address for the kingly sum of a few dollars."

He pointed a finger gun at me. "And that's why I hired you. Here …" He swiveled the chair around and motioned for me to sit. "You're looking for this guy."

Francis clicked on a file. A photograph popped open, displaying a ball of over-baked bread with a gold cross around a fleshy neck. The cross was the size of a saucer and crusted with enough diamonds to induce a tsunami of saliva in a rapper's mouth. This guy loved God and wanted everyone in a five-mile radius to know it. Too bad it wasn't big enough to cover his body because he was flossing his bronzed groin with a scrap of fabric originally intended to be swimwear.

I inspected the devout man's surroundings. Teak planks. Watery background. Semi naked and barely legal girls in the background, their faces blank as they mentally constructed shopping lists.

"This is a yacht?"

He smiled. "It is."

"So you're some kind of private security?"

"Sure," he said. "If that makes you feel good."

Yikes. That sounded ominous. Who was this guy and what was I doing here?

I waved a hand at the guy in the photo. "Who is he?"

"You don't know him?"

"Would I be asking if I did?"

His lips quirked. "The name is Sotiris Papadopoulos. He's connected."

"To what?"

He stared. At me.

Oh. That kind of connection.

"Aren't you connected, too?" I asked. He had that Godfather thing going on. Not Don Corleone, but maybe a Sonny, before Sonny had more holes than a golf course.

"I'm connected to a lot of things." He clicked around and brought up video footage of a Greek marketplace. Not one I recognized, but then I'd only seen a small shard of Dad's homeland. The camera was mounted high over the market, focused primarily on an arc of coffee shops. The tables were sparsely occupied; the bodies were hidden under layers of winter clothing. The footage was recent.

"This is a live feed," Francis said. "You're looking for Sotiris. He's scheduled to be here sometime today."

"And what happens when he shows up?"

"Transcribe everything you see—and anything you hear if you hear

it."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

As far as challenges went, this wasn't one. "Okay. I can do that."

"That's why I hired you."

NOTHING HAPPENED ON THE SCREEN. Not for three hours. People came and went. They shopped. Drank coffee. Gesticulated wildly as they argued over whatever it was they were arguing about; in Greece, it was most likely sports or politics. No sign of Sotiris Papadopoulos or his blatant display of faith. I knew guys like Sotiris. On Sundays, nobody did church harder. They were making up for the rest of the week when they did their sinning loud and proud. Wherever Sotiris was doing his sinning it wasn't in this particular village square.

"You can go to lunch whenever you're ready," Francis said. At his side was a skinny young guy in a t-shirt that read WHAT UP MO PHO. He waited for me to stand, then, shooting me a terrified glance, he slid bonelessly into my chair and shoved a pair of Air Pods into his ears.

What was his problem? That one tiny accidental murder aside, I was as scary as a kitten.

I wandered past the cubicles. Most of the other workers—there were a dozen or more—seemed to be monitoring some kind of website or sites. The remainder were glued to surveillance video. Everyone was quiet and self-contained. Very Umbrella Corporation. Look how that turned out.

Something caught my eye. I took a step backwards until I was level with a cubicle filled with cat knick-knacks and cutesy inspirational sayings. Anything was possible if I just believed and invested in cats. But cats and platitudes hadn't made me stop. The website on the screen looked familiar. Really familiar. Out of context it triggered my curiosity.

"That's the Crooked Noses forum," I said to nobody in particular.

'Technically the Crooked Noses Message Board," Cat Lady said.

"Why are you monitoring the Crooked Noses Message Board?"

She looked at me like I'd casually tossed away my last marble. "We are the Crooked Noses Message Board."

Wait, what? That was information a certain somebody didn't disclose at my brief orientation. "Francis skipped that part."

She snorted. "I bet he did. Probably didn't want to get himself murdered."

"I've never murdered anyone!"

Not intentionally.

“We know who you are,” she said, and on that nasal note I was dismissed.

With a pile of accusations accumulating in my head, I went to find Francis. He was in his office, staring thoughtfully at his computer screen. Lunch was in progress. A stack of pastrami barely contained by two thick slides of toasted rye bread. The pickle on the side looked firm not flaccid. He raised two eyebrows in my direction.

“We need to talk,” I said.

He swallowed. “So talk.”

I picked the most-likely-to-be-accurate accusation. “You’re BangBang.”

“No.”

Damn it. I was sure I was right.

“Are you sure?”

“I told you I wasn’t.”

“So can I meet him—or her?”

“BangBang isn’t a local.”

“But this is the Crooked Noses’ home base?”

He leaned back in his leather office chair, folded his arms. “Correct.”

“Feel free to interject with more detail at any moment,” I said.

“Why? I’m curious to see how much you’ve figured out.”

“You people are paranoid—the Crooked Noses.”

“Yes, but usually we’re right.”

“Because you spy on people and spread gossip.”

“No. We observe people in public, we scour the news, and we report what we see to our members, if they don’t already know what’s up. They’re an astute bunch. Take you for example. You’re no dummy.”

There was no point denying my membership status. I knew about the board, therefore it was logical that I was also a member.

“You know who I am? On the board, I mean.”

“FarFarAway Girl. It’s not like you even tried to hide your name.”

Regrets: I had them. “I guess the IP address gave it away, too.”

“You’re underestimating your grandmother. None of you ever leave the compound without a secure device. Even if we could locate your specific devices I’m sure we couldn’t crack them.”

Grandma only played a criminal at her day job, so it made sense that she had cyber protection out the wazoo. But Francis didn’t need to know about Grandma’s super-secret identity.

“Your board says awful things about me.”

“We report what we know. If something is blatantly false the boss squashes it.”

I perched on the edge of the spare chair. “You post crappy photos

of me."

"They happened. They're news. We post the YouTube videos, too. If they were fakes we'd ditch them. By the way, whose account is that? The YouTube channel, I mean. It has to be somebody important to get that close to you. Your personal bodyguard?"

As usual I wanted to kill Takis. That YouTube channel of his was a pain in my butt. "Oh, nobody. Just a dead man walking around with an ass for a head. Why did you hire me? It can't be so I can sit in front of a computer screen taking notes on random hoods."

"You have unique insider information. The job offer was a way to get you in the door and on our team."

"So the job offer isn't real?"

"It's plenty real. It's just not the job you signed up for. You're a Makris. You're royalty around here."

Ha. The joke was on him. Nobody told me anything. Usually I found out stuff by accident when someone was trying to kill me.

"No way am I betraying my family."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm hoping you'll become a sort of special correspondent. People will talk to you when they won't talk to us."

"So you want me to talk to people? That's it? Just talk?"

"Yes, and you won't have to sit in front of a surveillance tape if you don't want to."

"What do I have to do?"

"Your first assignment is an interview."

"An interview?" That didn't sound too bad. "With whom?"

"Your grandmother."

Chapter 12

AN INTERVIEW WITH GRANDMA. For an organized crime enthusiasts' website. My inner survivalist said Francis was nuts and I'd be totally bananas if I attempted to get Grandma to answer the list of questions my new boss had given me. The questions were a volatile mixture of fluff and hardball. Francis wanted to know about Grandma's hobbies, her hopes, her dreams, her favorite crimes. I was pretty sure Grandma's number one hope was that she'd never have to give an interview.

I was still reeling when I got off work for the day. Dazed, I wandered to the Jeep. Xander and Elias were right where I'd left them this morning.

"Have you two been there all day? Never mind, of course you have."

"How was the new job?" Elias wanted to know.

"The jury is still out."

Xander raised an eyebrow, because apparently asking questions with his face hole wasn't going to happen with Elias within earshot.

"That's a figurative jury, not a literal one," I explained. My family most likely knew a thing or two about buying and selling juries, so it was best to differentiate.

I unlocked the Jeep and angled into the driver's seat.

Discovering that I'd been headhunted by the Crooked Noses had thrown me off kilter. The whole thing was too coincidence-y. They just happened to be based here in Portland, minutes away from my family home? And Francis just happened to know Todd, who happened to be my ex fiancé?

Definitely too coincidence-y.

What was Francis's deal?

One person might know. The same person I never wanted to speak to ever again but now apparently had to because life is the bitchy mean girl sometimes. With a groan so loud that Elias jogged over to check on my health status, I called Todd.

"I need information and you're going to give it to me," I said when he answered.

"About?"

"Francis."

"Okay, but not over the phone."

"What's wrong with the phone?"

"Is your family still the Greek mob?"

"That kind of thing doesn't change overnight."

He chewed on that a moment. "Have dinner with me and we'll talk."

Christ in a cattery, he thought this was some quid pro quo thing where I'd extract information about Francis, and then we'd have a cute little chat about boys and whether or not Francis liked him. Fine. Whatever. I'd go along with it if it got me what I wanted. This one last time.

TWENTY MINUTES later we were standing outside PF Chang's, waiting on a table. Xander and Elias came, too. Elias looked at Todd like he wanted to pat him down for weapons, and not in the way he and Stavros probably did in private. Todd was gawking at Xander in a way that said he wouldn't mind diving for trouser sausages.

I snapped my fingers in front of his nose. His gaze reluctantly slid away from Xander, who to his credit was looking his nose at Todd like he wished Todd were on fire. His withering gaze made me feel warm and fuzzy.

"Do you know what Francis does?"

Todd shrugged. "Some kind of security. Why?"

"How did you guys meet? Bathhouse? Rave? Fashion show?"

"Starbucks."

"Was there a meet cute?"

Todd being Todd, I didn't have to explain the concept of a meet cute. He'd majored in romantic comedies.

His face lit up. He adjusted the messenger bag's strap on his shoulder. "He bumped into me. We both lost our coffees. So he bought me another coffee and invited me to sit with him. Why?"

"He gave me a job."

"Why?"

"I guess he thought I needed one. Did he ever ask you if you knew me? Or mention me in any way?"

"No—why? How did he seem? Did he ask about me at all?" His face was pinched, anxious, hopeful. Ugh.

"Why would he ask me about you? We broke up years ago after you fell on a penis. I haven't spoken to you in years. I don't know you anymore."

"It wasn't like that."

"You're right. More like you were on the floor looking for the contact lens you don't wear—when suddenly: a wild penis!"

"I didn't mean for it to happen."

“Life pro tip: if an unwanted penis enters your mouth, spit it out or bite it. That’s what most people do unless their life is in danger.”

The pinched look fell away. His hopeful expression turned to hardness. He didn’t look hurt, just angry. “That was years ago. Why are you being such a bitch about it now?”

“Why are you?”

“Screw you, Kat.”

Xander stepped forward. I held him back with one hand.

“Lose the goons,” Todd said. “It’s weird. They’re not you.”

He stormed off, bag slapping his hip.

I opened my mouth to verbally decapitate him and get the last and perfect words out, otherwise I’d spend my next thousand showers crafting comebacks I wished I’d made.

Todd exploded.

Chapter 13

THE FORCE SHOT me backward several feet, knocked me onto the ground with a bone-rattling thump. A weight landed on my body. Cool material covered my head. My nose filled up fast with the smell of burning keratin and meat. Was it me? Was I on fire?

"Ohmygod, ohmygod!" I shrieked. "Todd?"

Hands pulled me up. The material pulled away from my face. Xander and Elias were standing there, their expressions unreadable. People around us were screaming and scrambling to get away. Todd was nowhere to be seen … and everywhere. His legs were lying several feet away, smoke curling up and away from his pants. The curb was draped with pieces of his jacket. His scalp and hair were smoldering on the hood of his Audi. There was no sign of his messenger bag.

Xander curled his arm around my waist, lifted me up, tried to remove me from the scene of the whatever this was.

"No!" I yelped. "I'm not going anywhere! Todd! I have to help Todd."

His grip said I didn't have a choice.

"We have to get you out of here," Elias said close to my ear. "Baboulas would not want us to leave you here for the police to question."

Too late. A pair of cop cars rolled up to the restaurant. There was always a cop car cruising this parking lot, looking for trouble. Taxes in this neighborhood were higher and businesses here could afford to have the police perform a regular drive-by. As the first cop emerged, people pointed—and they pointed at me.

"He just exploded," I said, jabbering like a crazy person at the policemen as they swaggered up to see what all the commotion was about. "I didn't do anything. We were just talking."

They looked around like they couldn't figure out what it was they were looking at. For a slimly built guy, Todd made a wide and indecipherable mess.

"What happened?" one of them asked me while his partner went over to subdue the gawkers.

"He exploded!" My voice was shrill and panicked.

Portland's finest looked confused. "Like … a suicide bomber?"

"No, he was wearing a regular suit not a vest. He wasn't even wearing a beautiful leather coat with a bomb strapped to his chest."

"That's specific," the cop said. "Did you know him?"

"Todd Burns, my ex fiancé."

That seemed to interest him. "Ex. What happened?"

"He ate more than the recommended daily serving of dick."

"How many is that?"

"When you're my fiancé, one is too many."

He checked out the pieces of Todd, then he came back with his uniformed pal. "He just blew up, you said?"

Elias and Xander were standing off to the side. Xander's face was in neutral. Elias wore a scowl. They wanted nothing more than to stuff me into a car and drive away before sending Takis and Stavros to clean up the mess.

My teeth chattered. I was shivering from more than the cold. "Yes."

A new set of headlights stopped a few feet away. Two bodies got out. Their car doors slammed. The feds. Because this wasn't already the worst evening ever.

"We got a call," the Woman in Black said.

"We got a call," her partner echoed.

"Nobody got a call," I said, "because you're following me around."

"Are not," the Woman in Black said.

"And if we were," the Man in Black said, "it's because that's our job."

"We have questions," she said.

"So many questions," he said.

I was cold and tired and covered in Todd for the first time since before I unceremoniously severed our engagement. "You've got as long as it takes to drive me home. Somebody call Todd's parents, and be gentle. They're good people."

The policemen bristled. For the next five minutes they played My Jurisdiction is Bigger Than Your Jurisdiction. Eventually the police skulked away, leaving me at the mercy of the feds.

"We win," the Woman in Black said. "We usually do."

I tossed the Jeep's keys to Xander. "I'll be okay."

His face said I better be or he'd bang some skulls together. Elias wasn't any happier about me angling into the back of the black sedan.

"Baboulas will not like this," my bodyguard said.

"At least this way Todd isn't getting all over my Jeep," I said.

His lips quirked. "We will be right behind you."

True to his word, Elias followed us out of the parking lot and into the street. Xander wasn't so polite. He zipped up alongside the feds' car and cut in front.

The Woman in Black gripped the wheel. Her partner swiveled in his seat to look at me. Rules were for other people so he wasn't

wearing a seatbelt.

"You want to tell us why someone would blow up Todd Burns?"

"You know his name?" I asked.

The Woman in Black's gaze flicked to the rearview mirror. "We know everything about you."

"What's my favorite color?"

"We don't know that," she admitted.

"Then you don't know everything, do you?" I slumped back against the seat. "Todd was a basically decent person. If you want to know why someone killed him, you're asking the wrong person."

The Man in Black slapped me with another question, "Did he have any jilted lovers, like, say, you?"

"I wasn't jilted. He cheated. I left. Eventually I forgot about him."

"Cheating, huh?" The woman's gaze met mine in the mirror again. "That sounds like a good reason to blow up a man."

"It does, doesn't it? But I didn't kill Todd. I don't know who did. Even when we were together he wasn't the kind of person who had enemies."

"But you do."

"Are they really my enemies though? Most people who want to kill me only want to kill me because of Grandma. In the old days nobody wanted to kill me—not even at the grocery store."

The Man in Black passed a photograph to me. "Recognize him?"

My hand froze, along with the rest of me. The man in the picture was Viktor, my recently deceased—thanks to me—cousin and almost-husband. "Cousin. I have a lot of cousins. What about him?"

"He's dead," the Woman in Black told me. "The government is not happy about his premature death. They wanted to kill him themselves."

"Which government?"

They both shrugged. "All of them."

Another photograph landed in my lap. "What about this one?" the male agent asked. "Know him?"

Not Viktor this time, and not a cousin either. The man in the picture was Periphas Dogas, lunatic, eagle-enthusiast, and Papou's nephew. I didn't say any of that because I wasn't sure why that kook was relevant. Dogas was currently doing time—again—in a Greek prison for killing people for fun. He didn't have a thing in common with Todd or with Viktor, unless it was that all three men at some point had wanted to marry me—two of them against my will, and the third because he thought I'd make a respectable beard.

"We met when he was stalking me. Why?"

"Also dead."

"Since when? Wait—what does that have to do with me?"

“You tell us.”

“Nothing!” I’d quit thinking about Periphas the moment the barred door slammed in his face. “Was he killed in prison?”

They glanced at each other, then back at me. “Yes.”

My arms waved around at all the everything. “Do you see the problem?”

“People die around you?”

“Todd died around me. Periphas Dogas? He died in prison. He was a crazy person and he’s not my problem. Viktor … who knows?” I knew. “If I can be helpful—genuinely helpful without having to answer ridiculous questions—let me know. Otherwise, I really need to wash this man right out of my hair. Literally. And I’d really hoped I’d never have to say that.”

I flung the photos back at him and slouched in the seat, arms folded tight, guarding against stupid questions. They got the hint. Neither of them lobbed any more questions at me. They pulled up outside my house and I got out. They drove away. That was the end of that—I hoped.

Seeing as how it was my home, I let myself in. Everyone was in my living room, except Grandma, whose cooking streak continued in the kitchen, masking the stink of death and Todd.

“Don’t you have homes to go to?” I asked.

Grandma looked me over. She peered down her nose at me. Given that she was almost a foot shorter I was pretty sure that was some kind of Greek sorcery. “What is that in your hair?”

“Todd. Todd is in my hair.”

“He needs to see a doctor,” Takis said from the living room.

“Todd is beyond needing a doctor,” I said. “I’m not sure even Gus could help him now. He exploded, in case anyone is interested.”

Takis came in to gawk at me. “Sometimes that happens. Usually when I eat Marika’s beans.”

“Soak them in sugar water,” Grandma said.

“I do,” Marika said, following her husband into the kitchen. “Takis is a sack of farts with a man’s face sketched on it.”

The sack of farts with a man’s face shook his hands at the ceiling. “*Re*, I am standing right here!”

“I know,” Marika said sweetly, her hand diving into a bag of M&Ms.

“No—he exploded,” I clarified for all the slow people in the room. “Boom. Bang. Blood and guts spread all over the parking lot.”

“His car blew up?” Marika asked. “That happens a lot in our family.”

“No, just him,” I explained. “His car caught fire the other day and I’m pretty sure his rental was fine.”

“Did he have a bomb?” she asked.

“Not that I know of, but it wasn’t like I checked his pockets.”

Marika tossed an M&M into her mouth. “Remember Winkler’s adopted daughter? She exploded all over you, too. She had a bomb.”

Like I could forget. “Todd wouldn’t have a bomb. That wasn’t Todd. He liked kale and yoga and romantic comedies.”

“How would you know?” Takis said. “You did not know he was a sister until you caught him eating *loukaniko*.”

I ignored that. “Speaking of news, Periphas Dogas is dead, too. Killed in prison, apparently.”

Takis snorted. Grandma said nothing. She kept on mixing by hand while Mom’s KitchenAid sat on the counter looking sad and unwanted. Who does that?Grandma, that’s who. Anyone else would be all over the mixer.

“It is a miracle. Now he cannot force you to marry him,” Marika said.

“She should marry somebody before she gets old and her eggs dry up,” Takis said. “How old are you? Forty? Fifty?”

I shot him in the face with my best stink-eye. He laughed.

“Grandma, can I kill Takis?”

“Takis is a *malakas* but he has a good point,” Grandma said. “You should think about a husband before it is too late.”

Marika clapped her hands. M&Ms scattered across the kitchen. “I love weddings! I know the perfect dress shop in Volos.”

“I’m not getting married,” I said. “I’m not even dating. And right now the only place I’m going is the shower.”

Wedding plans continued without me—or a groom. Marika had ideas and she had a lot of them. Every last one involved mountains of food, parties, and a terrifying amount of tulle and satin. I trudged upstairs, one heavy footstep at a time. Coming home was supposed to be my shot at a do-over, a return to a normal life where no one exploded in my face and I never had to shoot anyone to survive. My plan was solid. My execution was the worst ever.

Xander was at the top of the stairs. A wave of helplessness washed over me.

“I don’t know where to start.” I sounded pathetic.

His head tilted toward the bathroom.

“Want to shower with me?” I asked. Shock had rattled my brains. Yes, I wanted to shower with Xander, but I didn’t want Xander to know I wanted to shower with Xander. Which was crazy. He was single. I was single. What was my problem?

Without a word, he took my hand, led me into the bathroom. He locked the door. ““Let me take care of this.” His words brushed my ear. “Take your coat off.”

The night was cold but heat rippled through my body.

I went to do as he said, then I caught sight of myself in the bathroom mirror. Blood freckles. Bits of bone in my hair. A pink-gray blob that I hoped wasn't a fragment of Todd's brain. A pained noise squeaked out of my throat.

"Don't look." With a gentle hand Xander turned my chin away from the mirror.

While I was staring into Hell, Xander had piled several soft towels on the floor by the tub. With calm, steady hands he removed my top layer and wrapped me in one of the soft towels. He indicated for me to kneel by the edge of the tub and bend my head over the edge.

"Close your eyes."

Warm water sluiced over and through my hair. With gentle hands he washed Todd away, using shampoo, conditioner, and one of those fine-toothed comb moms use to eradicate nits. Emotions bubbled up. Once upon a time I'd loved Todd with all my heart, then he betrayed me, taking a sledgehammer to my world. I cried for him, spending all those years in the stupid closet when he could have been out and happy. I cried because he was dead. I cried because he'd chosen wieners over me. I cried because I wasn't sure if we had a pipe snake in the garage. What if Todd clogged the pipes and I had to call a plumber to get him out? I wasn't confident I could pay the bill—not before payday, whenever that was. Plus how would I explain human debris in the pipe?

Xander turned off the water. He combed through my hair again before clipping it up in a makeshift twist.

"You're good at this," I said.

"I used to have long hair."

My eyebrows shot up. "Really."

There was a grin in his voice that wasn't on his face. "No."

A memory swam to the surface, of a name with no woman. "Did you do Sofia's hair?"

There it was, the name I'd been clutching in my hand since my first few days in Greece. Xander had mumbled the woman's name in his sleep. Soon after I'd forgotten the incident. Until now.

Xander's programming didn't so much as blip. With the smoothness of a well-oiled robot, he kept doing what he was doing, which was fine-tuning the shower.

"Every day," he said. "She loved it."

I gulped. Opening Pandora's box always seemed like a good idea until the harsh truth and other nasties spilled out. I could follow this line of questioning to my doom or I could let it go and be hunky dory with my ignorance. "Well, you're good at it. If you ever quit doing what you do, you could always be a hair stylist."

“Maybe.” He arranged the bathmat on the floor, folded the towels, directed me to the steaming shower. “I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

Did I need him? Affirmative. But could I open my mouth and tell him about the one spot on my back I couldn’t reach without a man in the shower with me? No, I could not.

“Thanks. But I’ve got this.”

“You doubt yourself, but I never have.”

XANDER’S SERVICES didn’t extend to laying out clean clothes for me this time, so I wrapped myself in the comforting embrace of oversized flannel pajamas and flopped down on the bed to get my bearings.

It took a while. My bearings were really messed up.

A soft snort jolted me out of my self-pitying mode. I tilted my head up. Bear’s nose twitched. Her eyelids were shut tight. Someone was really digging hibernation. Hopefully she wouldn’t wake up craving a Greek-American snack.

The phone rang. I reached over and snatched it up off the bedside table.

“I heard you had a bad day,” Melas said in his caramel voice. “What can I do?”

Tension melted out of me. New tension took its place. Horny tension. “Can you glue a man back together?”

“No.”

“Probably Gus could.”

“If anybody could it is Gus.”

True. Gus was a magician in the morgue. Give him pieces of a person and he could fashion a whole one. He’d done it with Litsa, my cousin’s George’s wife and Melas’s former lover.

“Not this time, I don’t think,” I said. “Some of the dead guy is in the sewer. Xander washed him out of my hair.”

“Xander washed your hair?” His voice had a sharp curious edge. There was a subtle rivalry between the men that had nothing to do with me and everything to do with a shared past that I knew next to nothing about. All I knew was that it involved Viktor—my dead cousin—Hera—Melas’s ex and Viktor’s—and bears.

“Only above the neck,” I said. “Periphas Dogas is dead, did you know?”

“How did you hear about that?”

“Feds.”

He gave me a questioning yet unsurprised look.

“Feds are following me everywhere because of my DNA,” I

explained.

Melas blew out a sigh. “Dogas is dead, that is true. He died a few weeks ago.”

“Was he shanked?”

“Maybe.”

“Could you find out?”

“I can do that.”

If he thought my request was weird he didn’t say. I wanted to know for no specific reason beyond curiosity. My life had well and truly exceeded its death quota. Yeah, Periphas Dogas was a whacko, but that didn’t mean I’d wanted him dead. Prison was a suitable alternative.

I gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks.”

“Do you know who blew up? Was this someone you know or a random act of Baboulas?”

I filled him in on the Todd situation. “How does a person just explode?”

“Was your ex carrying anything?”

I didn’t have to think twice. Breaking off the engagement hadn’t erased my memory. At night when I couldn’t sleep and desperately needed to be somewhere early the next morning, my idiot brain played the sausage-eating incident. Repeatedly. Sometimes in slow motion because my brain was a real jerk like that. I remembered Todd. I remembered us.

“His messenger bag. He never leaves—left—home without his laptop.”

“That is where they put it.”

“Whoever *they* are. Todd didn’t have enemies. He was the human equivalent of steamed rice.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

No. Not even close. Someone blew up Todd. Someone blew up my workplace. Someone set fire to my other workplace. My world was going up in flames, one piece at a time.

Todd didn’t have enemies, as far as I knew, but I had all of Grandma’s. What if one of them decided to use Todd to get to me to get to Grandma? Bad guy logic was always twisty, at best.

Melas promised to call about Periphas Dogas. After he ended the call I wandered downstairs to rustle up some grub. With Todd’s untimely and unexpected demise, dinner hadn’t been on my radar. Now suddenly my stomach wanted food—and fast. While I was cleaning up and talking to Melas, my family had evacuated. Once again, Grandma left a refrigerator and countertop full of food. I wolfed down a whole *tiropita* before hacking off a slab of *spanakopita*.

Melas called back as I was eyeing seconds.

"Periphas Dogas tripped and cracked his skull on a stainless steel toilet while he was cheering his football team. One of his cellmates smuggled in a phone so they could watch sports."

Wow. That was some bad luck and I told Melas so.

"It gets better. Apparently Dogas left you all his worldly goods. His wife is not a happy woman."

"Wife? He had a wife? Why was he trying to marry me then?"

"The wife came later. My source says he recently married some woman he had been corresponding with for years."

"So why leave me his belongings? I don't want his *anything*. Someone needs to get in touch with her and let her know it's hers—all hers."

That was weird. All of this was weird.

I didn't like any of it.

My bear didn't like it either. When I went upstairs she sniffed my breath once, snorted, and rolled over.

XANDER WAS in the kitchen with coffee in one hand, his phone in the other. In his black slacks and shirt he looked like someone you'd take home to your parents if you wanted them to panic about your virginity and whether it would be lost in a Fifty Shades scenario, minus the emotional abuse.

"Have you ever tied anyone up?" I asked him as he poured a cup of coffee and slid it over to me.

"Why?"

"For science."

"Not this week."

I sipped the coffee and sighed. Perfect.

"I don't suppose there's a muffin to go with this?"

He presented me with a paper bag. Nestled inside was an oversized chocolate chip muffin. "Stavros baked."

Of course he did. Grandma didn't know Stavros was the family's true heir to the master chef title. Kneecapping went with the henchman job title, but in his spare time Stavros longed to be a stay-at-home dad while he baked canapés.

I grabbed my coat, my bag, my keys and phone. The doorbell rang as I shimmied into the coat Xander was holding out. Elias was on the other side. He pointed to a box sitting on the porch.

"Package," he said. "This needs to be checked."

The box was too big to fit a human head, too small to fit a whole human. When I said it out loud Elias shrugged.

“Maybe if you cut a small man up into pieces and assembled him in the box like a jigsaw puzzle he would fit.”

I stared at the box. That could work.

“Whatever it is, it’s not for me. I didn’t order anything.”

It was for me. My name was on the label. Point of origin: Greece.

“Hey!”

I swung around to see Reggie waving from his porch. I waved back, avoiding eye contact with his lower half. Better to be safe than sick.

“One of those shady looking cousins of yours left that there earlier,” he called out “The human weasel or the bear?”

“The weasel. What’s with that guy? Does he know he was born without an ass?”

“He has one,” I said. “It’s on his shoulders.” I called Takis. “Did you leave a package on the porch?”

“It came yesterday. I forgot to give it to you after Stavros scanned it.”

“For what?”

“Bombs, drugs, human remains.”

Bomb free. Excellent. After my recent circus of a life a regular package was a welcome surprise. Maybe it was a care package filled with treats from Dad or Melas.

“What’s inside and who is it from?”

“Do I look like an oracle?”

“More like a cheese stick with a huge mouth.”

“Cheese stick? What is a cheese stick? The things you Americans __”

I ended the call. Way less satisfying than hanging up. App makers found all kinds of ways to replicate nostalgia with new technology. Why couldn’t they invent an app that invoked the smug, delicious sensation of ending a crappy call?

“Stavros scanned it for all the usual suspects,” I said. “It’s safe to open.”

Elias hauled the box inside and located a knife. With a few flicks, the tape popped free. He peeled apart the flaps. We peered inside.

Rat skeletons. An enormous leather glove thingy. Books about the care and training of eagles. A notebook filled with love and erotic poetry. A massive bundle of letters—at least two hundred scented envelopes. Male thong underwear. Finally, a packaging slip from a Greek prison that said all this loot was my problem now.

Yikes!

I jumped backward. This was it, my inheritance from Periphas Dogas. I didn’t want it, no siree.

I closed the flaps and shoved it away. “Wrong address,” I said.

Elias glanced at the labels. “It has your name on it, and this address.”

Xander opened up the box again, rifled through the contents. He pulled out the stack of letters and raised an eyebrow. He passed me one off the top, tapped the return address with one finger.

Well, well well, this was freakishly coincidental, which practically guaranteed it wasn’t. The return address was right here in the Portland area. The sender’s name was one Terri Fincher.

I shuddered.

Lately Portland felt more like The Upside Down. The only thing missing was the groovy 1980s soundtrack.

Hoping it wasn’t a federal offense to take mail after it had been posted, opened, and left to me as some kind of freakishly weird and inappropriate inheritance, I slipped the envelope into my bag.

“I’ll deal with this later.” When I was feeling less icky. “Right now I need to run. Mama needs to renew her Netflix subscription.”

I didn’t stop to ask if the menfolk were coming, too; I already knew the answer and that I didn’t have much choice in the matter. To be honest, although having constant bodyguards could be slightly suffocating, it was nice to know someone had my back.

Or whichever body part the bad guys were aiming a gun at.

Chapter 14

TWO VEHICLES FOLLOWED me to the Crooked Noses' building. The Agents in Black sat two cars back, trying to pretend I didn't know they were there. When I arrived at work I trotted over and thunked a knuckle on the driver's side window. It whirred down. The Woman in Black was behind the wheel. Both agents had foam mustaches courtesy of their Dutch Bros. lattes.

"Just so you know, they don't have public restrooms in here, so I'd go easy on the caffeine. It's a diuretic, you know," I told them.

"We're always prepared for long stakeouts."

I looked left. I looked right. "Did you bring a port-a-potty? Because it's invisible if you did."

They shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you wearing diapers? You are, aren't you?"

"We don't have to answer your questions," the Woman in Black told me.

Boy, were they dedicated. I had to give them that.

"If you need to be changed I guess you could ask Xander or Elias." I waved at my entourage. Elias waved back. Probably he wouldn't be waving if he knew I had just volunteered him for diaper duty.

"We'll be fine," she said.

"You say that now, but diaper rash is a real pain. Just ask babies."

Five minutes later I was at my cubicle, wondering what I was supposed to do to earn my paycheck. Francis wanted an interview with Grandma. Grandma wasn't interview material. Given that she knew all the tricks—probably she had invented most of them—tricking her into answering questions wasn't going to happen.

While I tried to figure out how to squeeze Grandma without her realizing she was getting squeezed, I used the Crooked Noses' resources to track down Terri Fincher, Oregonian and Periphas Dogas's devoted correspondent. Was Terri the wife the kooky eagle-lover had acquired in prison?

Facebook turned out to be my portal to the past. Terri Fincher no longer existed in her original form. Now she was Terri Dogas, a crusader who fought for one cause: romancing incarcerated men. Apparently hooking up with men behind bars was a real thing. She owned a page and group with hundreds of members, all of them desperate to bag their own convicted murderer, till death do they part.

The happy nuptials took place a couple of months ago in Greece, not long after Melas had catapulted Periphas Dogas back into prison. The new Kyria Dogas posted a single picture to the page to mark the occasion. Dogas in his prison costume, staring into the camera like he wanted to punch it in the eye, while a wedding cake with crazy eyes and a beehive grinned beside him. Dogas I'd met before, unfortunately, so I was more interested in his wife. She was two Marikas wide and an easy foot shorter than Dogas. It was possible she was the counterfeit elf from Santa's Grotto. According to her page they'd only met in person twice, and the marriage had never been consummated. But she was looking forward to the day, a minimum of twenty years from now, when they could grow old together without bulletproof glass conspiring to prevent them from physically expressing their love.

A month ago Terri's updates went dark. The other members plied the comments section with messages, demanding to know if Terri was okay. They speculated that Periphas had broken out of prison and the lovebirds were hiding out on a deserted Greek island, dining on souvlaki and galactical bootycall—aka *galactoboureko*.

The trail went dead, so I tapped in to the very website I was working for and ran a search on Dogas. Somehow I'd managed to miss the oh-so fascinating news of Periphas Dogas's recent wedding and even more recent death. While I was dealing with life, the Crooked Noses did what they did best: they gossiped and speculated. They knew long before I did that Terri Fincher was an Oregonian, and they knew Periphas Dogas had earmarked me as his future bride way back when. They put two and two and some more twos together and decided that Dogas's main interest in his bride was her nationality and state of origin.

Reason: me.

The whacko with the eagle couldn't shoehorn me into a wedding ring so he got the nearest—in his deranged mind—thing.

As far as theories went it was bonkers. But Periphas Dogas had been nuttier than a Snickers, which meant probably it was accurate.

Stavros's muffin sat like a brick in my stomach, steeping in acid. This whole Dogas business made me want to upchuck. It didn't help that I kept flashing back to the Todd-shaped hole in the world. How were his parents coping? Should I call? What if they already guessed I was maybe, probably, responsible for his murder?

My research was cut short by my impending boss. Once again he'd shown up to work in a suit with serious sheen. Paired with his face—*Godfather* meets *Goodfellas*—I kept picturing him mowing down prohibition-era crowds with a Tommy gun.

"Did you get that interview yet?"

"Not yet. Todd is dead. Did you hear?"

"I heard." He peered over my shoulder. "Periphas Dogas and his widow. I guess I don't have to ask why you're interested. It was all over the board when you beat him up in that basement."

Wow. Francis was stone cold. "Do you even care?"

"As soon as his funeral date is announced I'll be there. Want to come with me?" He made it sound like a date.

"I don't think so."

"Why not? You guys used to be together."

An opinionated voice inside my head told me that Francis would be overly interested in my theory that the freak responsible for my exploding life was also Todd's killer. As the Crooked Noses' head honcho, he might be tempted to share my thoughts with the world.

"He cheated. I left and never looked back."

"Okay, but if you change your mind …"

His nonchalance didn't help my chances of barfing. I changed the subject before things got messy.

My research told me that the Crooked Noses didn't know the dead fruitcake left me his worldly goods and had them shipped to me in a cardboard box. "Maybe you should ask why I'm researching Mr. and Mrs Dogas. It's positively gossip worthy."

Curiosity flipped a light on in his eyes. "Do tell."

"When I've got more facts."

"Tell you what, we'll do a swap. Get the interview with your grandmother and I'll give you what I've got on Periphas and his wife. The stuff that didn't make it to the forum."

"Deal," I said, hoping I'd signed up for something good and not anything the internet could tell me. A thin thread of panic wound itself around my intestines and tightened. How was I supposed to interview Grandma?

I bit my nail. It didn't help. All I had now was a ragged nail and no interview. I messaged Aunt Rita hoping for sage advice that wouldn't get me killed.

Be direct, she wrote. *Mama likes people who are direct. Also she does not like some people who are direct. When that happens she kills them. But she will not kill you because she loves you.*

That was heartwarming.

What the heck, why not be direct? Worst case, Grandma would say no. Okay, worst case she'd kill me, but I was counting on her natural instincts to love and protect her grandchild from murder.

I hunched over the desk and called Grandma. "I have a favor to ask."

"How ever much you want, it is yours. Unless it is for drugs or miniskirts."

“Why would I need to buy drugs when you’re always drugging the *koulourakia*?”

“I have not drugged my *kourlourakia* in days, How much do you need?”

“It’s okay, I don’t need money.”

Technically I did need money, which was why I was calling her to begin with—to get the money. But not her money—my own money.

“What then?”

“I need to ask you some questions.”

“Questions? What questions?”

I leaned back in the chair, closed my eyes, imagined my final moments in a Greek guillotine, whatever that was. Probably something cobbled together with rope and a donkey. “Just … questions. About you, your life, that sort of thing.”

A long pause happened. The kind of pause that makes a person wonder if the other person dropped dead mid-call. At Grandma’s age it was possible. That or she was digging through her bag, hunting for a gun to shoot me.

“You mean an interview,” she said at long last.

“That’s such a dirty word. How about let’s call it a questionnaire? Questionnaires are so civilized and they can be fun. That’s why they put them in magazines and why Buzzfeed manages to still exist.”

“No interviews.”

“Not even for me, your only granddaughter? The only person who knows about your addiction to romance novels.”

There was another long pause where I worried about her health. “Grandma?”

“You play dirty.”

“When I have to—and I do have to.”

“Why? Who wants you to ask these questions? What do they want?”

“I just want to get to know you better.”

“Can we ever really know anybody?”

“Grandma, I never knew you were a philosopher!”

“You know who is Greece’s most famous philosopher? My *kolos*. Send me your questions. I want to look at them.”

Within seconds she had the questions on her phone. Her disapproval radiated over the airwaves.

“This reads like questions from a woman’s magazine. What is my favorite color, who was my first murder, what is your favorite way to kill a drug dealer, *etc.* Where did these come from?”

“Work.”

“What is this work?”

“I guess they’re just interviewing powerful and interesting women

who can kick ass and take names."

"Okay, I will answer your questions because I am powerful and interesting and I believe a woman can do anything, especially if it is running the world. Ask and I will give you answers, eh?"

"I already know your favorite color is pink." I scanned the questions. They ranged from frivolous to of special interest to federal prosecutors all over the globe. "What's your favorite crime to commit?"

"Jay walking."

"Greece has jay walking?"

"Greeks invented crossing the street when they are not supposed to. Many Greeks were struck down by Turks on donkeys while they were darting across the road."

That rang true. Greeks had invented a lot old stuff. "When did you know you were destined to be a criminal?"

"When I married your grandfather and realized one of us had to have the *archidia* to take care of the family business."

"Granddad wasn't a criminal?"

"Oh, he was. But not a very good one. He always preferred books and philosophy and hiding away to read."

"And when did you start doing the other stuff? The good guy stuff. That's not an interview question. That's me being nosy."

"Before I married your grandfather."

"Really?"

"The best thing a girl can do is get an education and a job that she can keep a secret even from her own husband, that way she will not lose the house if her husband is a worthless excuse for a man. Not your grandfather. He had no balls for organized crime, but he was a good man. But my father … *po-po* … he stole oxygen with each breath."

"Moving on," I said. Yes, I wanted to know more but this wasn't the time or place. When the time and place did roll around there had to be wine. A lot of wine. "Do you ever plan to retire?" I was back to Francis's questions now.

"We will see."

There were more questions after that. Grandma answered them all, more or less. Probably some of her responses were even true. Not the one where she said she'd tried to steal the Parthenon Marbles back from the British Museum, but definitely others. Although now that I thought about it I felt the sudden urge to see if any covert reclamations had been attempted.

Francis was a happy camper when I presented him with a transcribed list of Grandma's responses.

"Nice work. Do you think she was honest?"

“I think she was Grandma.”

Was that good, was that bad, who can say?

He slid the paper aside and presented me with another list of questions. “Ready for your next assignment?”

“An interview with the devil? Sorry, don’t know him. But I’ve met some of his siblings.”

“Baby Dimitri.”

My eyebrows shot up. They took their sweet time coming down. “Excuse me?”

“I know you know him. We’ve got pictures in the database of you hanging out at his shop. Word is he likes you.”

“Tolerates. There’s a difference. And I doubt he’ll tolerate me if I start pumping him for information about his likes and dislikes, although I can tell you the man does like boobs. Anyway, no can do. I’m not going back to Greece any time soon—if ever.”

“Ever hear of a phone?”

I tilted my head. “No. What is phone, precious? What is phone?”

“Very funny.”

“I’m a funny person. Anyway, you said you had information about Periphas Dogas and his bride.” I wiggled my fingers at him in a *give it to me* motion.

Francis leaned back in his chair. His smirk said he was about to tell me stuff I didn’t know—stuff that would knock my socks off. I hoped he wouldn’t knock them all the way off. It was winter and I needed these socks to stay warm.

“The word is Periphas married one of his American pen pals as a substitute for you after you turned him down. Terri Fincher had been writing to him for years, long before he was temporarily released and consequently re-incarcerated.”

He wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t know. I dropped into the chair anyway. “What’s wrong with these men?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not a beast but there are other women out there, prettier, thinner, and with better jobs.”

“You don’t like your job?”

“I just started! I haven’t had time to like it or dislike it yet. But other women have careers.”

“I get why they’re interested. You’re cute, you’re connected, and you’re the sole heir to one of Europe’s largest crime families and its fortune. In certain circles, you’re the ultimate catch.”

“Yay?”

“Some women would be thrilled.”

“Not me. I’m less thrilled, more annoyed.” I rubbed my hands together. “I already searched the board and everything you just told

me is there, so what else have you got for me?"

He slid a sheet of paper across the desk. "Terri Fincher's address."

"Already got it."

"How?"

"Dogas left me a box of junk I don't want because he was a lunatic who wouldn't take no for an answer. There was a letter inside with a return address. More than one—a stack."

That made him abandon the casual pose. He tapped his index finger on the desk. "Imagine for a minute you're the faithful wife, waiting for the day your husband gets out of prison. Then your husband not only dies, but he sends his belongings to another woman. What would you think?"

The steady influx of information crystallized into a useful, terrible thought. I recalled my anger, a white-hot flare of fury, when Todd cheated. In that moment I was capable of anything. Lucky for Todd I was mostly sane and eager to avoid prison time. If I was several fries short of a deluxe gyro, say, the kind of woman who considered prison a great place to shop for husbands, there's no knowing where Todd would be now.

Okay, yes, I didn't know precisely where Todd was now. Parts of him were currently in the pipes beneath my house, but other parts were incinerated in the explosion. For all I knew he was in the lungs of random Portlandians.

Poor Todd.

Then I remembered what Papou said when we spoke. A woman had come to ask him about his eagle—the eagle that originally belonged to Periphas. A looney widow might want that bird for herself, as a link to her dead husband.

Sometimes it seemed like there was no bottom to the crazy in my world.

"Do you think she might be mad enough to blow up stuff and people and leave threats in the form of graffiti and occasionally on nice stationery?"

I already had Terri pegged as my undesirable one-way pen pal. What if she was more?

"According to people who know—"

"You mean snoops?"

"I mean employees and freelancers. Terri Fincher's house is filled with prescriptions for things I can't pronounce but that the internet tells me are for people with real problems. She used to collect cats, but she dumped them all—ten of them—at a pet shelter when Dogas started to show interest."

"Cats and eagles don't really mix, I guess."

"She has no friends except her acolytes on the internet, and her

family lives down in Florida. She goes to church likes it's her second job. On weekends, after church, she buys two sacks of McDonald's and watches *Grey's Anatomy* marathons on Netflix."

"There's nothing wrong with Netflix marathons," I grumbled.

"Terri Dogas doesn't have issues—she has *all* the issues. If I were you I'd be worried. You need security? I can get you security. All you need."

For a price, no doubt. Maybe not money but definitely favors—the kind of favors that could get me killed. Baby Dimitri might give me a pass when I got nosy, but how many other gangsters would dish up hot, fresh gossip?

None many.

"Security isn't a problem," I said.

"No, it wouldn't be, would it? Baboulas would never send her granddaughter home without loading the shadows with guns and eyes." He quit leaning in the chair and sat upright. His expression was curious. His nose was more crooked than ever. "Can I ask what you're going to do with this information?"

"You can ask," I said. "But I don't know yet."

I TOTALLY KNEW. Earlier I typed Terri's address into my phone, and as soon as I could escape work I planned to zip over there to have a word with the new—and newly widowed—Kyria Dogas about her dead husband and his belongings.

I stopped by the house on the way over, stuffed Dogas's crap back into the box, taped up the whole confection. Elias tried to carry it for me.

"No way," I said, swiping away his attempt at chivalry. "This is my baggage. I want the satisfaction of ditching it myself."

He grinned. "Okay, boss."

Terri Dogas—formerly Fincher—lived in a townhouse in Aloha, where the rents were high and the meth heads had to pile twenty bodies to a house to afford sleep between tweaks. High rents didn't mean high quality, just greedy landlords. The townhouses huddled together around patches of dirt, interrupted periodically by plants that looked like they'd been disappointed by life. Jaded kids were hauling a refrigerator from the dumpster to a narrow stream that ran alongside the property.

"Cool boat," I said as I was getting out of the Jeep.

"Bitch, it's a refrigerator," one of the kids said, a seven-year-old with dead eyes and a floppy blond Mohawk. He flipped me off. Then his pals flipped me off. I didn't flip them off because someone had to

be a responsible adult and a good role model. Also, I was carrying this box so I didn't have a finger to spare.

I trudged over the cracked, faded parking lot to knock on Terri Dogas's door with my boot. There was no door bell. Terri's door was separated from its neighbor by two thin strips of trim and two inches of siding. The neighbor had one of those cheap chairs people use for their kids' sporting events set outside, the kind that come with flimsy mesh cup holders.

Nobody answered.

As I prepared to knock again, the neighbor's door flew open. There was meowing from several feline mouths. Someone hardcore collected cats.

"Are you looking for Terri?" Terri Dogas's neighbor looked like the kind of person who had fifty alleged health conditions and wanted to chat enthusiastically about them all.

I said that I was.

"She's not home."

"Any idea where she is?"

"I got all kinds of ideas if you've got time." She didn't wait for confirmation. She plonked herself down in chair and settled in for what I hoped wouldn't be a long time. "She's not at work. I know that because I was down at the secondhand store this morning and she weren't there. And I know she wasn't at the library because I went there for my videos and she weren't there neither. Want to know what I think?"

My nod was superfluous; she was going to tell me anyway.

"I think it's something to do with that man, if you can call him that. He's not even American, and he's in prison. Prison! What kind of woman hitches her wagon to a man in prison—and not one of us neither. It's unAmerican. She never even met the man except the one time last month that she went over to see him. One of those brown countries, I think. Foreign. Probably one of those shitholes where they eat babies and wipe their butts with their hands. They're all the same to me. When she came back, she came back married. Bragging about it, too, like it was some kind of accomplishment. Probably got herself knocked up and now my taxes are gonna pay to raise her kid."

Wow, someone was a little ray of sunshine. "What do you do?"

"I'm on disability on account of how I can't work. Hurt my back lifting boxes. I had surgery—"

I cut in before she launched into a never-ending story that would see me dying here of old age. "When was the last time you saw Terri?"

She shrugged. "A couple of days ago. Heard her sneaking in early this morning though. By the time I got to the window she was already inside. I was feeding the cats when she left. You don't say no to cats.

They'll eat your face."

"Do you think she's"—I approached the subject delicately—"a crazy person?"

"She ditched all her cats. What's that if it's not crazy?" She squinted up at me. "You look like a cat person. How many do you have?"

"Zero, but I'm hoping to invest in cats in the near future."

"Hopefully you won't get stuck with a neighbor like Terri. After she abandoned her cats and took up with that foreign jailbird, she left me a note saying I better keep my cats locked up good because when her husband moved in he'd be bringing his eagle with him—and if there's one thing eagles like to eat it's cats."

I DROPPED the box at home and drove back to work, where I stared at the ceiling and wondered if Terri knew an expert bomb maker and whether she had a history of arson. I tried to walk a mile in her shoes but her shoes were banana peels.

Francis wandered over to my cubicle. "Bad lunch?"

"I went to find Terri Dogas."

"Did you get your woman?"

"She wasn't home. Her neighbor said she hadn't been around much."

"Newly widowed … she's probably keeping herself out of the house and busy. The question is: how is she keeping her mind off her husband's death?"

His point was icky and scary and dark. His point was also potentially accurate. What if I was Terri Dogas's new favorite hobby?

"I don't like the sound of that."

"You know what, you should bring that box of Dogas's things inside and we can have a look through it. Maybe there's a clue in there. Another address. A hiding place."

"It's at home," I said.

"Don't worry, okay?" He touched my shoulder. "If I post her picture to the General board, I bet we can locate her in hours, then your guys can keep a preventative eye on her."

"The Crooked Noses can do that?"

"We're everywhere. We post to the internet and we know things. In the meantime, how's about you work on that interview with Baby Dimitri?"

That wasn't going to happen. But maybe I could switcheroo the interviewee. "Would you take an interview with his nephew?"

"You mean the kid? Isn't he in high school?"

“Sometimes.” Donk—real name Yiorgos—spent most of his time ditching school and sneaking around in my shadow. Donk’s uncle encouraged the teenager to hang out with me. The Godfather of the Night and Watching Boobs figured time spent with me was giving the boy a good crash course in organized crime. I didn’t mind too much. Donk’s mother was a former porn star, porn director, and stone cold killer—current whereabouts unknown but probably nowhere good since Baby Dimitri got his mitts on his half-sister for a variety of crimes—so I worried about the teenager.

“What can he tell us?”

“He’s seen things—probably more things than Baby Dimitri lately.”

Francis mulled it over for a moment, then shrugged. “Yeah, all right, see if you can get the kid to talk. But I still want to hear about Baby Dimitri’s life in his own words. He’s a figure of interest to the Crooked Noses.”

Every criminal I knew was a figure of interest to a lot of people. What would Francis do when my list of contacts ran dry? I didn’t fancy being some kind of field reporter. I’m built for a life of couches and pizza, which, I was sure, made me part retired greyhound.

“I’m on it,” I said.

He flashed a quick smile. “Got plans for Christmas?”

Christmas. Yikes. It was almost here and so far I had zero gifts for family. “Sure,” I said, lying through all thirty-two of my teeth. “You?”

“No plans. I’m a free man.”

“No family?”

“None that matter.”

Before I could spit out a few platitudes, he said, “Give Baby Dimitri’s nephew a call. I have somewhere to be.”

He rapped twice on the wall of my cubicle and took off.

Not one to slack on the job, I called Donk.

“You want a *poutsa* pic?” he said when he answered.

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’m trying to quit.”

“Yo, bae, you do not know what you are missing.”

“Bae? BAE?”

“It is American slang for ‘baby’.”

Sadly, I knew what it meant. I was eager to steer him away from slang. Donk did unspeakable things to the English language—things worse than *bae*. “What’s new? Besides pictures of your genitals,” I said quickly in case he got the wrong idea.

“Nothing. All I do is work, work, work. When is the Donk supposed to have fun? Do you know when I last had sex?”

I went out on the world’s shortest limb. “Never?”

“Never,” he said, clearly unhappy about the situation. “Girls all over Greece are throwing away their best opportunity for a good time.

I tried writing my number on bathroom walls but the only people who call me are German men."

"I'll light a candle for you. What work?" These days, when Donk wasn't at school, which was most of the time, he stuck close to Elias, who was teaching him the ins and outs of being a bodyguard.

"Kyrios Elias is making me guard an egg while he is away. It has to go everywhere I go, and I cannot break it. I cannot even give it to a babysitter. It has to be me, all the time."

"Want to do something fun?"

"Is it sex?"

"No." I told him about the interview.

He brightened up. "A real interview? Fack yeah, bra."

I winced at his assault on my mother tongue.

My phone beeped. Incoming call.

Marika was on the other end.

"There is someone in your house and I know it is not you because you are at work, and I know it is not Elias or Xander because they are with you. And I know it is not Baboulas, Thea Rita, Stavros, or Takis because they are out shopping at some place called IKEA."

"Grandma is at IKEA? Really? Wait a minute—how do you know someone is in my house and why aren't you shopping with the others?"

"Somebody had to stay behind to keep an eye on your house, so I volunteered."

"Is everything okay with the baby?"

"Of course, but Baboulas brought over a lot of sweets and I was feeling a bit hungry, so I decided I should stay and eat. For the baby and my health, you understand."

"Marika?"

"Yes?"

"Who is in my house?"

"I cannot tell from here …"

"Where are you?"

"Behind your back fence, staring through a knot hole. Do not worry, I am good at surveillance. You did not know I was here for days, did you?"

She had a point—and her point said as much about me as it did about her. I was sloppy. All that peering through windows and watching the world from the roof and I'd still missed what was right in front of me, and behind me, and in my crawlspace.

"I have to run," I told Donk. "There's someone in my house."

"Is it a burglar?"

"Probably—or worse!"

"Fack yeah!"

I winced again.

Francis was out of the office so I called him to let him know I was busting out of work for the second time that day.

“No problemo. Did you get the interview with Baby Dimitri’s nephew?”

“Working on it,” I said. “He’s eager.”

“Excellent. The Crooked Noses will love it. They’ll be drooling by the time you score the Baby Dimitri interview.”

Yeah, like that was going to happen any time soon. Later on I’d have to figure out a way to let Francis down easy. Tell him Baby Dimitri was dead or something. Something told me the wily old mobster would dig that.

Chapter 15

"We should call the police," I said.

I inspected Xander. I inspected Elias. Both men looked like they did a little light breaking-and-entering in their spare time. Then there was Marika, who probably had half a dozen guns stashed in the handbag over her shoulder.

"Maybe we don't call the police," I decided.

"Good idea," Marika said. "The police do not seem to like you much, except Nikos, and Nikos is not here."

"They like me just fine," I said. "I'm a model citizen. Or I used to be before Greece happened."

Marika hugged me around the shoulders. "Greece changes a person."

Xander went in first while I waited outside on the porch with Elias and Marika. Arguing with Xander seemed like an exercise in futility. There was no winning when he was on mute.

It took him fifteen minutes to sweep the house. When he reemerged it was without prisoners or missing body parts.

"What took so long?"

He made a shape in the air with his hands.

"A giant marshmallow?" I guessed.

He thrust his chin up-down. No.

"Overstuffed pillow?"

"I bet you are terrible at charades, eh, Boss?" Elias said.

"The worst."

Up-down. Xander made the shape in the air again, this time with finger effects that to be honest were a lot like spirit fingers. I wondered if part of his past involved a stint in musical theater.

I tried again. "Bomb?"

"Bomb?" Marika clutched her chest. "Why are there always bombs?"

He made a hand motion like I was hot and getting hotter.

"Searching the house took longer because you were searching for a bomb?"

Nod.

Great. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to my messed up life.

"Did you find one? Or more than one?"

His chin went up-down. So that was a no then.

"Relax, everybody," Marika said. "There is no bomb."

I exhaled. “Can I go in?”

Xander nodded.

Before he could hit me with another round of charades, I bolted inside to check that everything was okay by my standards. First stop, my miniature zoo. Everyone was safe and accounted for, including the bear, who couldn’t care less who was wandering around the house invited or uninvited. Second, Mom’s jewelry and photos, from back when our family was three people wide. Third was the super-secret hiding place where I’d hidden the cassette tape that may or may not control a nuclear silo in Siberia.

Only one thing appeared to be out of place—so out of place that it was no longer in the house. Periphas Dogas’s box of unwanted goodies.

When I ran back to the Elias and Xander with my brilliant observation, neither man looked surprised.

“Xander stuck a tracker in the box and put it on the porch after you took it inside,” Elias said casually like it was no big deal. “Dogas’s wife must have grabbed it, just like the gods—and Xander—intended.”

“Sneaky,” I said. “What now? Do we go get Terri Dogas? I mean, she’s the thief, right? No one else would want Dogas’s thong underpants.”

“Xander goes to get her. You stay here.”

“Why?”

“Because she is *trela* and capable of anything.”

Crazy. He meant crazy.

“I know a lot of people like that. Some of them are even family.”

We went around in a circle. I wanted to go. The men wanted me to stay.

Marika had something to say about that.

“As your supervisor I say Katerina and I will go while you men follow us for backup. We will not need backup because I am very good with a gun. Elias, give me your gun.”

Elias didn’t give her his gun. He’d witnessed Marika’s shooting.

Marika went on, undeterred. “But now that I think about it, it is best you come with us anyway because I am not sure how Takis gets rid of bodies, and he will not tell me.”

“What a monster,” I said. “I can’t believe he won’t give up all his trade secrets.”

“I do not give him mine either. I would cut off my own hand before I gave him my *tiganites* recipe.”

“It’s not just potatoes, olive oil, and salt?”

“He must never know that,” Marika said darkly. “Never.”

I promised never to part with Marika’s recipe for fries. When I turned around, Xander was gone and Elias was inside checking all the

windows and doors.

"Where did Xander go?" I asked.

"To follow the package," my bodyguard said.

"I am the supervisor. I decide," Marika said. "This is not what I decided."

"Maybe Xander doesn't know that," I said.

Elias stifled a grin.

"I saw that," Marika said. "I have children. I have eyes in places men will never have eyes. I can see what you are thinking."

Elias hurried out of the room, leaving us alone. I did another circuit of downstairs to make sure nothing was missing. If Xander had left the package on the porch, who had been sneaking around inside my house and why? You'd think people would learn a thing about that classic cautionary tale, Goldilocks, but apparently they were slow on the uptake.

The ceiling creaked. I knew that creak. There were nights when I came home after curfew and had to crawl on my belly like a reptile to avoid putting pressure on those planks in the hallway upstairs. The planks never squealed without good reason, and that reason was always feet.

"Elias," I called out. "Where are you?"

Elias appeared around the corner. "Garage. Why?"

I pointed at the ceiling. "Someone is up there."

"Xander checked. It was clear."

He was right. If Xander said the house was safe, the house was safe. But what if he'd missed a hiding place or someone had snuck in after he gave it the all clear? Those things happened all the time to people like me. Well, just to me.

"Maybe it is that crazy woman who calls herself Kyria Dogas," Marika said.

"Maybe," I said.

"Xander is tracking the box," Elias said. "It cannot be her."

"What if she and the box aren't together? What if she didn't steal the box."

Elias looked genuinely worried. "I did not think about that."

None of us had. "But then who else would want the box?" I asked. "It was full of useless junk that nobody would want, except his wife."

The ceiling creaked again, this time over my room. I relaxed. This wasn't a breakin—it was a simple case of lumbering bear.

"Bear," I said. "Not bad guy. I'll go up and check on her."

Marika made other plans. "While you do that I am going to see what Baboulas left here. All this excitement has made the baby and me hungry."

I jogged upstairs, wondering what my bear was up to. Maybe she

wanted another little midwinter snack. All the commotion might have aroused her curiosity enough to jerk her out of hibernation. Would she settle back down if I read her a story? I could do that. The crawlspace was home to several boxes of picture books and early readers.

I stepped into my bedroom—my empty bedroom.

No bear.

If it wasn't the bear making the floors creak, what was it?

Something cold, round, and metal touched my temple. The open end of a gun. This particular gun was in Francis'ss hand. He moved around until the gun was pointed right at my forehead.

"Surprise," he said.

I rolled my eyes—hard. "Oh for crying out loud, you really *are* a villain?"

He scoffed. "You didn't know."

"I knew you had a crooked nose," I said. "I knew it the minute I met you. Damn it, I hate it when stereotypes turn out to be right. If you guys could prove me wrong and surprise me for once, that would be swell because this is boring and predictable."

"Yeah, right. If you didn't like me it's because you thought I was fucking your ex. I didn't, by the way. Not my type. Too much of a sissy. I like a man with some man in him."

"What do you want? Dogas's box? Too late. His wife took it. You want to fight someone for his old Greek underpants, go talk to her."

"I don't care about some deadbeat criminal's box of shit. That stupid bitch he married took it—she can have it. She's harmless enough."

"Harmless? She left threatening notes—some of those were really mean. I've never been skanky. She blew up my work place—two of them. She killed Todd."

"The notes … I can't take credit for those. Hipster Burger, the pet food place, that pussy Todd, those were all me. His car fire, too. That was practice. Not every experiment works out."

Until now I'd forgotten about Todd's little car fire.

"The notes though, they were all that Terri psycho." He shook his head. "That bitch is insane. Me, I'm a man of action. I get shit done."

Black spots blotted my vision. Fear turned my blood to ice. Anger made it boil. My body didn't know what to do except curl my fists into tight balls. I wanted somewhere to put them, like Francis's smirking mouth. "You blew up Todd? Why?"

"Don't act like you're not happy about it. The man cheated on you."

"I'm not happy! Okay, I might have been a bit impressed if you'd done it when I caught him scarfing sausage, but I was over it. Way over it. Years over it. Todd was a decent man—well, a mostly decent

man. He didn't deserve to wind up sprayed across a PF Chang's parking lot!"

He sniffed like he expected me to bow down while simultaneously singing his praised. "I figured I was doing you a favor."

"Don't do me any more favors, and by the way, I quit. Wait—I'm not quitting. This way I can collect unemployment—I think. Is that how it works?"

I'd avoided it up until now, but if I survived this then I'd be forced to apply. If I didn't then I might start imagining my cow divvied up in to steaks.

"Nah, you're definitely fired. The best part—one of the best parts—is that I won't have to pay you. You were a joke, scrambling to get bullshit interviews with organized crime's shittiest assholes. I worked hard to maneuver you into a bullshit job and give you bullshit duties."

My heart began to hammer. I'd put it through hell these past few months, tossing it from one dire situation to the next. "Do I at least get severance?"

"Call it that if it makes you happy." He glanced around, eyes cold, calm, serpentine. "The plan was to make a big splash when I kill you, but if you prefer I can make it look like mostly natural and only slightly suspect circumstances."

Fear shook me between its cold teeth. "Wow, what a choice. I just can't decide."

"Hmm…" He pretended to think about it. "Let's make it big and showy. That's what dear old Grandma would do."

"What does she have to do with this?"

"That's what this has all been about. The fire. The explosions. The murder."

"I don't get it."

He drew a box in the air.

"You're going to have to art better," I said. "Not that I'm criticizing you. I can't even make a stick figure look like it's supposed to be a person."

"Frame," he said, exasperated. "It's a frame."

"I don't know, it looked more like a wonky rectangle—practically a parallelogram." My teeth chattered. Pronouncing geometry words was tricky at the best of times.

"You try drawing better air art!"

"Well, okay." I raised my finger.

"That wasn't an order! Jesus Christ, I was going to kill you to frame your grandmother, but now I think I'm gonna kill you just to make you shut up."

I laughed. Frame Grandma? Who did he think he was? Some kind of criminal mastermind? Grandma could think circles around this little

pipsqueak—in her sleep.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You! You're ridiculous."

"If I'm so ridiculous why are you on the wrong end of this gun?"

"That does keep happening," I admitted. "It's a real problem. So how about you put it down and we talk about why you want to frame Grandma?"

I had a plan. That plan involved me chatting like a parrot on cocaine until Elias showed up with his own gun. The rest of the plan was hazy, but it involved Xander, ropes, and a kick-ass soundtrack.

Francis didn't know about my plan. From the dreamy look on his face he was clearly fantasizing about his own deluded plot.

"Think about it." He swiped his hand in a wide overhead arc. "Notorious mob boss slaughters heir and only granddaughter."

"Was that meant to be a headline?"

"What else would it be? I'm a newsman."

Where was Elias?

Keep talking, Kat. Keep talking.

"Wow," I said, following my own advice, "that's a terrible idea. Even worse than your air art. Have you thought about going back to school, maybe learning a trade? Why would anyone believe Grandma would kill me? She loves me. She bakes cookies for me. Have you seen my kitchen? It's full of Grandma-baked food. Grandmas don't do that for granddaughters they're about to murder." I thought about it for a moment. He didn't know dick about Grandma's other law-abiding side. To him she was a stone cold murderer who wouldn't think twice about snuffing a granddaughter. The Grandma I knew would think about it at least three times before pulling the trigger—and even then the bullets would likely be rubber. Or tranquilizer darts, like the time she faked my death.

Francis wore the smug smirk of a guy who thought his plan was solid and manly because he'd come up with it. "You took a job working for a popular website dedicated to revealing gossip and information about Katerina Makri's—without the pretentious s—business. You finagled an interview with her. You turned the information in that interview over to me, the one person who could disperse details of her private life to a wide audience."

"It's not that popular," I muttered. "So I wouldn't go around bragging about your wide audience."

"How would you know? We have thousands of members who sign in daily. The site is already a big moneymaker. Our memberships and page hits will soar when the cops identify your charred body parts and only the Crooked Noses have the inside scoop. You're one of our employees, after all."

“And your motive for doing this is what, exactly? That part is really hazy.”

“Why do you care?”

“You’re about to kill me. The least you can do is tell me why. It’s common courtesy for the villain to fess up.”

He looked dubious. “Really? I thought that was only a thing in movies.”

“Oh no, real life villains do it all the time, too. That’s one thing movies get right. So if you want to be authentic and all …” I waved an encouraging hand at him and hoped he wouldn’t notice the tremor.

“Well, all right. Do you know how hard it is to stand out these days? Being on the ground floor of this event will catapult me into the stratosphere. Everyone gets five minutes and now I’m ready for mine.”

“Is this because you’re short? Because I know a lot of sexy short guys. You’re not one of them on account of how you’re holding a gun in my face and that really turns a woman off—except, now that I think about it, the Terri Dogases of the world. Hey, she’s single now. Maybe today is your lucky day.”

Francis ignored me. “Influencers can make a fortune. People pay attention to them, give them televisions shows, money, access.”

This guy was pathetic--pathetic and homicidal. “So you’re killing me because you want to be a Kardashian? Dude, that is the lamest thing I’ve ever heard. If you weren’t about to kill me I’d feel sorry for you.”

“Maybe it’s lame to you, but that’s because you’re a spoiled brat who doesn’t appreciate what she’s got. Everything got handed to you thanks to a DNA fluke. The rest of us? We gotta work hard for the money and all the trappings. As soon as I heard you threw some kind of tantrum in Greece and stormed back to Oregon, I knew I had to meet you and set a plan in motion.”

“That’s why you set up shop in Portland?”

He shook his head. “That was dumb luck. No, I engineered a meeting with Todd, who fell all over himself trying to get some of this.” He groped his own crotch. Eww. “Then I followed you to that lame burger place. “The Crooked Noses isn’t my brainchild, I told you that. It was already conveniently here. You want to know more, you’re gonna have to ask the boss.”

“Love to, if you’ll pony up a name.”

“No can do. I get the feeling the guy will put a bullet in me if I try.”

“So it’s a man? Good to know. Because my next question was going to be: animal, vegetable, or mineral?”

“Fuck me, you’re annoying!”

“I do my best because you bad guys seem to hate it.”

“I’m not the bad guy here!” He considered that for a moment. “Okay, maybe I’m a little bit bad, but it’s for a good cause—my cause.”

During the course of the conversation I’d slowly been moving sideways until Francis’s back was to the stairs. The air shifted. A gun appeared around the corner of the top step.

Elias. Finally.

Except it wasn’t Elias. It was Marika and her unpredictable hand. Francis leaped like a kernel of popping corn when Marika shoved the gun’s business end up against his spine.

“You better be careful,” she said in Greek. “I used to be a housewife and a mother, but then I became a bodyguard, then an assassin, and now I am a freelancer and also a supervisor, which means I am qualified to do anything except hit a target with this gun.”

“True story,” I said. “Marika shot holes in a Ferrari once.”

“I got Katerina a very good deal on that Ferrari,” Marika said proudly.

“You have no idea how cheap a Ferrari gets when it’s shot up.”

Francis glanced from me to Marika and back again. “I didn’t understand a word your stupid friend said except ‘Ferrari’.”

“He doesn’t speak Greek,” I told Marika in Greek.

“Barbarian.”

I couldn’t disagree with that. Now that the psychopath in the hallway was distracted I eyeballed his groin and its lack of defenses.

“Where is Elias?” I asked Marika.

“In the attic,” she said. “He climbed up the side of the house and in through the roof as soon as he realized this *malakas* was here. I think he plans to drop down like a spider and snap the *malaka’s* spine.”

“I don’t have an attic, just a crawlspace.”

“You do not have an attic? I thought all American houses have attics.”

“Speak English,” Francis said, waving his gun at me.

“She started it,” I said.

“What did he say?” Marika wanted to know.

I looked at her over his shoulder, which wasn’t difficult. There wasn’t an overabundance of Francis. “Now would be a good time to shoot him.”

Marika’s eyebrows shot up. “He wants me to shoot him?”

“Tell the fat bitch to speaking fucking English!” Francis yelled.

Marika’s face turned red, then purple. Her understanding of English warped in and out conveniently. “Did this tiny pretend man call me fat?” She squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. She turned the weapon around until she was violating one of the main tenets of gun safety by squinting down the barrel. “You know what I think?”

I hazarded a guess. “That you’re out of bullets or rounds or whatever they call the projectiles that go in that particular gun and now we’re in serious trouble and maybe going to die?”

She smacked it against the wall. “No—I think my husband has been interfering with my work. As soon as I see him he is never getting *tiganites* again. Ever. Especially not with fried eggs.”

That seemed fair.

Francis used her lack of gun safety to his advantage. He whipped around, seizing my hair and dragging me until Marika and I were both on the wrong end of his gun. Tears of rage and pain rolled over my lower eyelashes.

“You are the worst,” I told him. “Well, maybe not *the* worst because I’ve met a lot of awful criminals, but you’re definitely one of the middle worsts.”

He laughed. It was a cruel sound from a stupid mouth. “Downstairs. On the couch, both of you.” He shoved Marika and kicked me, the mid-sized meanie. No doubt he was on Santa’s “Coal Only” list. If I got the opportunity I’d cut off that leg and shove it up his nostril—sideways.

“Let Marika go,” I said. “She’s not part of this.”

“No.”

“She’s pregnant.”

He snorted. “Someone stuck it in her on purpose? Wow. I’d hate to be that guy.”

“Do you know Grandma’s henchman Takis?”

He paled slightly. “That’s his wife?”

“And mother of his children. They have a lot of children and one on the way. Takis won’t take it well if you hurt her.”

Francis paced for a moment, gun slack by his side. “Give me a minute, I need to think.”

My breath caught. Maybe Takis’ reputation as a ruthless henchman would save the day.

“Okay, I thought about it. You’re both dying anyway. This is double the story now. The mobster’s granddaughter. The henchman’s pregnant wife. And I’m the guy who gets to tell the story.”

Marika and I huddled on the couch. This couch had seen things. It knew Dad, it knew me, it remembered Mom. We had movie nights here. Mom made beds for me on this couch whenever I was stricken with the latest plague. Now there was a good chance I was going to die here with Marika.

“There’s no way you’ll get away with this,” I said. My teeth chattered, clipping the crisp edges off my words.

Francis grinned, his nose more crooked than ever. “Of course I will. I’m attractive, I’m charming, and as far as surveillance tapes are

concerned I'm in my office right now."

"Okay, maybe you'll get away with it, but you'll have to live with it. Well, until the Family catches you. And they will, sooner or later. I've heard Takis decapitate a grown man and watched him carry the head away in a sack. That head belonged to a serial killer and former cop. You're just a keyboard jockey."

He moved around behind us. There was a sick thud, and then Marika went, "*Oof*," and slumped on my shoulder. The ass-clown had whacked her with his gun. The same thud echoed in my head, and the world went black.

Chapter 16

I OPENED ONE EYE, then the other. Then I opened them both again because it hadn't worked the first time.

"Marika?"

There was a groan. "Katerina?"

"I'm here," I said. "But the bad news is that I think I'm blind."

She gasped. "So am I."

I bumped against something. Pain shot up my leg. "I hate to say it, but I don't think being blind is going to work for me."

"Do not worry, Baboulas will get you one of those dogs. Me, I want a stick so I can smack my children when they do not behave."

She'd wear the cane down to a nub in no time.

I bumped into something else. I crouched down and felt around. My fingers touched porcelain. Scuttling sideways, I felt around until I reached the door. I jiggled the handle. Nothing. I twiddled the lock. The door didn't open.

Helpless, I slumped against the door and drew my knees up to my chin.

"The good news is that we're not blind. The bad news is that we're trapped in the master bathroom. Francis must have broken the lock."

"That is bad news."

The door was thick, solid, a replacement for the original door which had a hollow core. Dad said he wanted a place to *klasimo* in peace without us gagging and mocking him for his gas eruptions. No way could we Kung Fu it open. Dad installed that door like he meant it. In a nuclear winter this door would be enduring in its frame, a DIY cockroach.

"There's no way out," I said.

Not entirely true. Several feet away, behind the medicine cabinet, Dad's handgun was tucked into its cool bed of money and passports. If I had light I could open the safe and get to the gun. The gun could shoot out the broken lock. If I had light.

Light. Duh.

"Marika, never tell anyone about what I'm going to do, okay?"

The air shifted as she crossed herself in the dark. "I promise I will do my best never to tell anyone what you are about to do. Is it a crime? You can tell me."

I reached up and flicked the switch above my left ear. Clear bright light poured into the room.

After a whole lot of eyelash fluttering as we adjusted to the light, Marika said, “You are right, I will never tell anyone that you are a *vlakas*, except maybe Takis—and only after he does that thing to me that I like.”

Way too much information. “You didn’t think about the light switch either! Close your eyes.”

“Why? I only just realized I am not blind. Now I want to look at everything.”

“Because I have to do a thing. A private thing.”

“Could you let me out first? My sense of smell is very sensitive while I am pregnant. I can smell chocolate from a kilometer away.”

“No, not that! There’s a way out, but it’s a secret.”

“Like a tunnel?”

I thought about it. “Kind of like a tunnel.”

“Then I hope it is a big tunnel because do I look to you like a woman who can easily fit in a narrow tunnel?”

Slap a dress and wig on that rolling boulder in Raiders of the Lost Ark and you’d have a pregnant Marika. But I didn’t say that because I loved her and wanted to live.

“You’re as beautiful as ever,” I said.

“Okay, do your thing that you have to do.” Appeased, Marika turned around. I immediately got to work opening the safe hidden in the wall behind the medicine cabinet. Everything was accounted for, including the gun. In the cabinet I found earplugs. I gave Marika a set and kept one for myself.

“Block your ears and lie down in the tub.”

“I do not like the sound of this.”

“You’ll like it less if you don’t block your ears.”

“Okay, then I will lie down.”

She eased into the tub while I shoved earplugs into my ears.

“Ready?”

“Takis will kill me if I die.”

I aimed at the lock—because that’s what people do in the movies—and squeezed the trigger. The gun went off in my hand with an eardrum-shaking pop, even with plugs. To my surprise, the lock shattered. Marika heaved herself out of the tub with a shriek.

“It’s okay. It worked. It worked.” I squinted at the gnarl of metal. Its locking days were over. “I can’t believe it worked, but it worked.”

“No—I cannot believe you shot something and did not let me have a turn!” She raised her eyebrows. “I thought you said it would be like a tunnel.”

We looked at the tiny hole in the door. “That’s kind of like a tunnel,” I said, nudging the door open with my boot.

Elias appeared. His face was equal parts horrified and relieved.

“What are you doing?”

“Katerina shot a hole in the door,” Marika told him, “and I am complaining because I am the one who has experience with a gun and she did not let me do this job.”

I had more pressing concerns. “Where did that jerk Francis go? He tried to kill us.”

“Outside, hog-tied and gagged on the front lawn,” Elias said. “I jumped on him after he tried to run. We have to get out. There is an explosive device in the kitchen.”

“Didn’t Xander check?”

“That *malakas* put it there before he locked you in the bathroom.” He waved his arms at us. “Come!”

I had to hand it to Grandma; she’d hired a man who was part Border Collie. Elias herded us downstairs toward the stairs with the ease of a dog steering sheep.

“Wait—what?” My feet suddenly balked at the whole leaving thing. “We can’t just leave! We have to defuse it.”

He raised his brows at me. “Do you know how to defuse a bomb?”

“I might know how,” Marika said. “Do you know how many times Takis has watched that movie where that man stops a bomb before it goes BOOM?”

My eye twitched. I pressed the twitch with my finger. “Probably Xander knows.”

“Xander is not here,” Elias said. “Takis not here. Stavros is not here. It is just us. I do not know how to defuse a bomb. My job is to keep you safe, and the way I can do that is by getting you out.”

“This is my parents house, I can’t just leave!” My whole life was here. My history. Who would I be without it?

“It is just a house. Go!” He nudged me down the stairs. I dragged Marika with me. We tore toward the front door. I shoved Marika out then waited for Elias to shoot past us. “Come,” he yelled with the urgency of a Greek widow boarding a bus.

I stopped on the porch. Shook my head. “My pets.”

“They are in the yard, they will be safe.”

“Not my bear.”

“Where is the bear?”

“Upstairs, trying to hibernate.”

“Leave it! Bears can take care of themselves.”

Maybe they could, but not this bear. She was mine and I’d promised her I’d take care of her. There was a time not long ago where she had taken care of me.

“What’s going on?” Reggie called out.

“Family meeting,” I yelled back. He saluted me—with his hand for once, which was nice.

From inside there was a modest *whomp* and the jagged tinkle of glass vacating its frames.

Bomb.

I strode over to Francis, who was facedown in a patch of lavender, and poked him with my boot. “You suck at bombs.”

“*Mmmpf mmmp mmf*.”

“Elias?” I said.

“Yes?”

“Was there just the one bomb?”

“I think so.”

“That wasn’t so big,” I said. “I’m going back for my bear. Get Marika to safety.”

“Katerina!” Elias grabbed at me … and missed. I’d already employed eel mode and slipped through his fingers.

My bodyguard was wrong: This wasn’t just a house. It was a house on fire. A wall of heat hit me as I slipped inside the front door. Flames were eating their way through the kitchen, a bit like a pregnant Marika really. I ripped off my sweatshirt, wrapped it around my face like I was Lawrence of Arabia, and charged up the stairs. If I moved fast I could get us both out without becoming barbecue. Tears poured down my face. I wiped them away. They sprang back again. The world blurred. My lungs stung as I bumped along the hallway to the master bedroom, where the bear was simultaneously hogging both sides of the queen-sized bed.

“Come with me if you want to live.”

Bear opened one eye. The great black triangle that was her nose twitched. Then she scooted forward and plopped onto the floor with a seismic thud.

Jesus in a jelly jar, she was huge. Huge and scary or not, I had to get her out of here.

“Let’s go.”

She sniffed the air. Her head swung around leaving her body no choice but to go with it, which left me staring at bear butt. Her mouth opened. She roared.

“Want to go out the window? Fine, we can do the window.”

I flicked the lock, yanked the window up and—

Out she went, straight through the screen and into the tree, where her claws dug into the bark. One massive paw at a time, she scrambled down the tree.

Huh. Well, at least one of us wasn’t going to die in a fire.

There was no way I could make it to the tree with anything like bear finesse. Climb out the window and I’d risk a bunch of broken bones—important bones, too. None of that busting a kneecap or snapping a pinkie.

No choice but to go back the way I came.

I grabbed souvenirs on the way out. Family photos that I stuffed under my coat. Mom's jewelry. Sweatshirt wrapped around my nose and mouth, I burst out into the hallway. The staircase was a no-go. The living room was filled with fire and it was coming straight for me. Between the upstairs windows with their bone-breaking heights and the fire vaulting from room to room, I was surrounded by certain death.

My choices dwindled, and what was left was hopeless.

I dragged my blanket off the end of my bed and drowned it in the tub. Then I slung it over my whole body and ran. The fire would never get me now, as long as I kept my escape to less than thirty seconds.

I could do this.

A voice struggled to reach me through the billowing clouds of my parents' belongings.

"Katerina? Are you Katerina?"

I pivoted but couldn't see a thing with all this smoke and fire and blanket.

"Who are you? Wait—I don't care. Take my hand unless you want to wind up smoked like rack of baby backs."

"I want to hate you." The woman's words were thick, tear-stained. "I came here to punch you in the throat for being a skank, you know."

The heat was closing in on us. No time to worry about punching and skanks. I lifted the wet blanket. "First, get in my blanket fort."

There was a pause. Then: "I like blanket forts."

Ditto. Especially when they were standing between death and me. I held my breath, raised the blanket's edge. Suddenly, there was another woman under the blanket with me. I knew her face, even blackened by smoke and smushed by the blanket's weight.

Terri Dogas.

A small gasp slipped out of my mouth.

"Why?" she pleaded.

"Why what?"

"Why did Periphas love you and not me?"

Because her dearly departed husband was cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. "You need to get a grip because he didn't love me. He didn't know me. We spoke one time. One."

"He sent you his things!"

"No—the prison sent his things. Probably they messed up and sent the box to me when it was supposed to go to you. Prisons aren't known for their efficiency."

She bit the edge of her bottom lip. "Do you think?"

Did I think so? No.

Did I tell her so? Also no. I wasn't stupid. I wanted to get us both

out of this house before we asphyxiated.

"Yes, absolutely. I'm sure that's what happened. Let's get out of here."

Terri had other, way more inconvenient plans. She sank to the ground, moaning. At least she wasn't rocking back and forth in the fetal position, so we had that going for us. "I don't want to live without him."

I tried yanking one of her arms. She wasn't going anywhere unless it was her idea.

"I hate to point this out but you don't have a choice."

Her squinty eyes blinked at me. "I want to die, too. Then we can be together for eternity. It will be like the movies and our love story will never end."

"Or, you could claim his remains, bring him home, get him cremated, and keep him on your windowsill the way my grandmother does with my dead grandfather. She talks to him all the time, and the fun part is that he has to listen. He can't avoid her."

"Really?"

"Cross my heart and hope to not die in this fire, which at the moment it looks like we're probably going to do."

She sniffed. "I guess I could dig up his body and bring it home."

"Great! Awesome! You should do that! But first we have to get out of here."

Terri looked up at me with a whole lot of crazy in her red-rimmed eyes. "Okay." Her teeth sank into my left ankle.

I howled.

While I was crying like a wounded infant, she clamped her hands around my other ankle and yanked me to the ground. I hit the carpet with a winded *OOF*. Terri Dogas tugged the blanket off me, threw it over her own head, and ran out of the house, leaving me to burn.

Some people sucked. And after I'd shown her hospitality and played grief counselor, too.

Smoke clouded my vision, filled my lungs with stinging nettles. My eyes watered. I coughed and spluttered. All that did was make room for more choking smoke.

With my family photos stuffed under my coat and Mom's jewelry in my pockets, I crawled toward the front door—or where I thought the door used to be.

Bang.

Wall.

I backed up and veered right.

Bang.

Coffee table.

Why did this house have so many walls and tables?

I put my face down at ground level and tried swallowing a breath of less polluted air. Bad idea. It was smoke all the way down. My biological clock said time was up. This was the end.

Suddenly, boots appeared instead of furniture and walls. Xander bent down, a black bandana hiding the bottom half of his face. His eyes were hard and black. His forehead had more lines than a coke dealer's stash. He scooped me up. That was nice. I wasn't going to die alone.

"It's you," I said with my dying breaths. "It's always you."

Chapter 17

SPOILER ALERT: I wasn't dead. I knew this because everyone was staring at me like I was Lazarus—the Bible guy, not one of Grandma's neighbors—coming forth from my dry and cozy burial cave. Probably they were gawking because I was a tiny bit on fire. Xander dropped me on the grass and rolled me around until I was no longer a glowing Yule log. Once I was out, he sat me up.

While I was barbecuing inside, part of the family had shown up and assembled on the lawn. Grandma and Aunt Rita were absent.

"Nice hair," Takis said. He laughed himself into a coughing frenzy.

"That is what you get for being a *malakas*," Marika said. "I think Katerina looks adorable. Like a baby bird."

"Mirror," I croaked. Sucking down smoke for a few minutes made me sound like a pack-an-hour barfly.

"You want a snack?" Marika said, waving a *koulouraki* under my nose. One end had teeth marks.

"Maybe in a minute." There was no way that cookie would survive the next couple of seconds, let alone a minute. "Where's a mirror? Mirror, anyone?"

No one gave me a mirror.

My eyes narrowed. Why wasn't anyone giving me a mirror?

"Mirror?"

Nothing. Mostly they were avoiding eye contact.

Ha. Who needed a mirror when I had a pocketful of modern technology that made the human nose look like a root vegetable? I located my phone and toggled to the front-facing camera.

I peered at the nightmare on the screen. Soot-blackened face. Hairstyle by fire. Nothing a good guillotine couldn't fix.

My phone vanished back into its pocket.

"Let us never speak of this," I said darkly.

"Too late," Takis said. "A lot of people are already speaking about this. They love your new hair. This one says you look like his dog's *kolos* when it had the ringworm. This other one says you look like a chicken when his *yiayia* is plucking the feathers, also from its *kolos*."

"People? What people? Takis?"

He put on his innocent face, which was his regular face with a hundred percent more stupid. "What?"

"Did you put me on YouTube?"

"Of course not. I posted pictures to the Instagram. Why are you

looking at me like that? I used filters to try to make you look better, okay? But I am not a magician."

One of these days I'd get payback. Not today though. Today I was glad to be alive and not on fire.

Fire trucks arrived. I stood on the sidewalk watching firefighters battle to save my home. I wasn't dead and I wasn't alone. My family was with me, my pets were safe, and so were the feds, who had questions like "Why is your house on fire?" and "Did you do it?" and "Can I use the bathroom if you still have a bathroom?"

I told them what I knew: Francis did it because like half the country he was chasing fame and fortune. Killing me, pinning it on Grandma, and then scoring the exclusive story was his version of winning *American Idol*.

"Worst villain ever," the Woman in Black said.

Her partner made a face. "Kite Man is the worst villain ever."

"Kite Man? Who the hell is Kite Man?" she said.

The Man in Black snorted in disgust. "You need to read more."

"Say …" the Woman in Black looked around "… where is this so-called Francis character?"

Francis had vanished, along with Terri Dogas.

"Maybe you should go find them," I said, "seeing as how that's your job."

Grandma arrived with Aunt Rita and a man in a suit. He spoke five languages and knew everything there was to know about the law, or so Aunt Rita told me when she recited his resume.

"Leave," he told the feds. "Leave now and never come back."

Phone calls were made. Apologies happened. The feds peeled away in their black car.

Reggie Tubbs was impressed. "Anyone who can ditch those guys for good has real power. Say, if you ever need a former judge in your pocket, I'm always happy to look the other way for a small fee," he told Grandma.

Grandma glared at him. Or maybe she was smiling. Hard to tell sometimes.

Reggie wasn't deterred. "Your grandma looks like an old leather sofa cushion, but I'm turned the hell on."

The house eventually stopped burning. It wasn't a total loss. Most of the upstairs was intact, which meant Mom wasn't lost completely. I had that. I had her photos and jewelry. That was better than nothing.

Grandma walked away to make a call. When she came back she said, "Someone will come to fix your house."

"I need to call the insurance company," I said, suddenly remembering I was an adult.

"No. No insurance companies. They will stick their *poutsas* in your

kolos. No one in this family gets a *poutsa* in their *kolos*." Her gaze skated to Stavros and Elias, who were on the verge of holding hands. "Almost no one in this family gets a *poutsa* in the *kolos*. Your house will be exactly the way it was. If we cannot find the right furniture I will have it made for you."

Emotions welled up. Grandma was okay for an undercover spook and a part time mobster. Other emotions quickly followed. Annoyance. Disgust. A bunch of anger all aimed at the two numbskulls responsible for the fire and my hair issues.

I turned in a slow circle and took stock of the lawn. Nobody around except family and Reggie, who had his eye on Grandma. "Where are Francis and Terri?"

"Gone," Grandma said, cooler than frozen cucumber. "Xander took them."

"Ohmygod, is he going to kill them? Because you can't just kill people here. We have laws and consequences and Supermax."

"Laws. Consequences." Grandma's pucker said she didn't care much for the legal system. "Both of them need to eat wood."

"Can I at least see them?"

"For what?"

"Closure."

Grandma fixed her gaze on me. Maybe it was my imagination but I got the feeling she was glad I hadn't sizzled up in the fire. Then she reached up and planted a kiss on each of my sooty cheeks. "Tomorrow is Christmas. Clean up and help me get ready for the feast, eh?"

"It's Christmas Eve?"

Time was stubborn and relentless, marching day and night toward I didn't know what. Hopefully a big cosmic cake or pie.

"Takis will take you to them," she said. "That is one of my gifts to you. You deserve to be able to look your potential killers in the eye—if you can find their eyes with all the swelling."

"Does it have to be Takis? I kind of want to shove him out of a fast moving car."

"I will get all the boys to spit on his food," Marika called out. "And I will not do that thing he likes for at least a month."

Grandma glared at us all. "If anybody asks what is that thing Takis likes, I will kill them where they stand."

TAKIS SNICKERED. I pummeled him with my best stink-eye. That's what we did all the way around the block to the house behind my parents' house. It was a nice place. Big. Two-story. Either it had come fully furnished or someone in the family had seriously speedy

decorating chops and contacts at Pottery Barn.

Francis and Terri were upstairs in the smallest bedroom. Francis was at the desk with Xander's gun pointed at him. Terri was crying in a corner like I'd left her to die in a burning house.

She stopped crying when she spotted me. "What happened to you?"

"Some stupid cow stole my wet blanket."

"Oh. Was that me?"

I rolled my eyes.

"You can't do this!" Francis said to Xander, his hands poised over a laptop's keyboard.

"What's going on?" I asked Takis in Greek.

He shrugged. "Why are you asking me? I just got here."

I crouched down beside Francis. He did a double take and laughed.

"Look at you," he said. "Got a hairdo like you stuck your head in a furnace. You don't look so privileged now."

"Some asshole set off a tiny explosion in my house and set it on fire."

He grinned. "How's the house?"

"Probably gonna outlive you."

"Too bad. You plan to let him do this?"

"Why—what's he making you do? Tweet?"

"Resign from the Crooked Noses, effective immediately, and confess to embezzling money from the company."

"Were you embezzling?"

"Call it that if it makes you happy." He looked up at Xander. "You won't get away with this."

"Dude," I said, "do you even read your own message board? Mobsters do stuff like this all the time. In fact you're getting off downright easy. I bet Takis over there could saw off your limbs and boil them into a bone broth in his sleep. No one would ever find you."

Terri sobbed harder. "That's terrible."

I wheeled around. "Terrible? Why do you think your husband was in prison? Shoplifting to feed his family? Jaywalking? Straight up murder is what got Dogas a second prison sentence. He killed people and cut up their body parts and sent them to me."

"That's an awful thing to say. You suck."

"What's going to happen to her?" I asked the menfolk.

"Baboulas is leaving this one up to you," Takis told me.

Me? My mind spun. My body stank of smoke. My hair—what was left of it—reeked of burnt keratin. Even at my best, thinking up fitting punishments wasn't one of my hobbies. I wasn't Grandma. Not too long ago I'd killed a man partly out of self-preservation and mostly by accident. Killing Viktor was never my plan. Justice was fine but not

when it dressed in revenge's clothing.

"Let her go," I said. "She's a nut, but she just lost her husband, even if he was a psychopath."

Takis' jaw dropped. "Let her go?"

"She's been through enough."

He made a face. "Can I cut off one of her fingers as a reminder to stay away from you?"

"No. No amputation. It's mean."

"Okay, but remember she sent death threats and left you to die in a burning house."

When he put it like that … "Can you access police records?"

"Sure. We can do anything. What country?"

"Greece."

He unclipped his phone holster. "I can do that now. What do you want?"

Takis was a dick but he was an efficient dick. "Send Kyria Dogas home with some before and after pictures of her husband's victims. Maybe she won't go *poutsa* fishing in the maximum security prisons next time." I turned to Xander. "I don't care what you do with this one. He killed people—decent people—and for no good reason. If you decide to make him disappear forever, that's between you and your maker. But maybe don't kill him because that's illegal and I don't want to come visit you in prison."

I pivoted and left Francis and Terri to their fates.

Footsteps followed me out of the room. "Wait," Takis said. "I will drive you."

"Around the block? I can walk."

I walked. He cruised alongside me at the speed of tortoise.

The sidewalk was empty when I stopped in front of my house. Everyone else had piled into the house around the corner, I assumed. Probably to eat Grandma's pre-Christmas cooking.

Right there on the lawn I hummed carols to myself and watched steam rise from the blackened bones of my parents' house. I thought hard about what was supposed to come next. No house. No job. But I had my health, if not my hair, so that was nice.

"Tell me you did not lose it in the fire," a woman's voice called out from across the street. I whipped around to see my neighbor—the constant walker—marching down the driveway in her sweats and sneakers.

The rain started up again the way it always did in winter. When I wiped my face my hand came away black.

"Huh?"

My neighbor jogged across the street. This was the first time I'd seen her up close, and I could see now that her face had issues. It

didn't work like a regular face. I half expected her jaw to unhinge as she swallowed a rat.

"Did you lose it?"

The voice was familiar now that it was speaking Greek. It couldn't be …

"Hera? Holy cow, I'm pretty sure I've had this nightmare before." I pinched myself to make sure this wasn't all a dream, because to be honest that would solve ninety percent of my current problems.

Ouch. Not a dream. I was stuck with this hairdo until it grew back.

The temporarily suspended NIS agent wasn't my least favorite person in the universe but she was vying for second place with all the people who'd tried to kill me lately. It was a big list. Competition was stiff.

"Why are you here, and what's with the crazy outfit?"

Hera laughed. "You should see your face. And your hair … it is the best thing I have seen in my life. Stay like this forever."

"You are truly one of life's cockroaches."

"Thank you."

That she'd dodged answering my question didn't matter much, Without her uttering a word about her agenda, I knew why she was infesting my home turf with her skanky perfume and offensive personality. The "it" she'd mentioned was the cassette tape I'd pilfered in Siberia.

"You sure walk a lot," I said.

"I got shot, remember? Walking is good exercise while I heal."

"You're here for the tape."

"Yes and no."

I gave her two raised eyebrows and a head tilt.

"I want the tape but I also want to make sure no one else gets it. So where is it?"

"Safe."

"Would you bet your life on it?"

"No, but I'd bet yours."

Under her fake skin, she made a face, thrusting her further into the uncanny valley. "Can I see it?"

"Ha! I wouldn't trust you as far as I could bowl your bony skull down this street. But I'll check on it and report back."

She considered that for a moment—like she had a choice. "Okay. I will wait here."

Before I left, I had one more question: "Why do you care?"

Hera shrugged one bony shoulder. "My job is my life. That cassette is the only way back to my job."

"If it contains the codes. I don't know that it does."

On the porch next door, Reggie grinned. "Well, hello."

Hera swiveled on one Nike heel. “Never speak to me again,” she said in English.

Reggie laughed. “God sure knew what He was doing when He invented broads.”

I left them to it. Reggie could handle himself. Probably he was handling himself right now.

Structurally the house was ambiguously sound. Didn’t matter anyway; I wasn’t going inside. I eased through the side gate, the leftover smoke stale and bitter in the air. When I was sure I was alone, I stuck my hand in the birdhouse, where I’d stuck the cassette to the inside of the roof with duct tape, after wrapping it in a dense layer of plastic wrap.

My hand touched wood.

No cassette. Not in the birdhouse.

Someone had found my hiding place.

The list of candidates was short. Someone else—Takis, Stavros, maybe even Xander—had likely done the pilfering, but at the end of the day that tape was destined to end up in just one black handbag.

Well played, Grandma. Well played.

I went back to Hera and grinned. “Bad news—for you, anyway—you’re about to drop dead.”

“Is there good news?”

“Are you unhappy right now?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the good news.”

She didn’t snark back, that’s how I knew the situation was dire.

“Then it’s over,” she said.

I looked at the house. My childhood home. My adult home. The place where I was happy until Mom died and the world turned gray … until Greece blasted it with a whole rainbow of colors. Staying here was out of the question while Grandma’s architects and contractors were busy replicating my past. I was homeless. Jobless. With a slew of unusual pets to care for. I’d come home to avoid crime and Greece, and both hunted me down anyway.

But it wasn’t as though I had no place to go. Grandma had that tape, and I for one intended to find out which part of her took it: mobster or the government.

“Not even close,” I said. “What are you doing for Christmas?”

Thank you for reading Christmas Crime!

Kat will be back shortly in Winter Crime.

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All my best, Alex A. King

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Pride and All This Prejudice